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Author's Note

I'm rather excited about this book. I've rewritten Clouded Skies so many times, to get to the third book... Wow. It's so amazing. The farthest I've gotten is halfway through the second book, so to get here... It makes me really happy in a really hard time. And to have even just a few people interested in the story of the cats I've created... Once again, wow. Of course, the Warriors universe is not mine. It belongs to the Erin Hunters, while I just morphed my own story in their amazing, neverending world. If you haven't read my first two books in Clouded Skies, The First Storm and Frost, you definitely should so you can get to know the story.

I hope you enjoy!

EDIT: I'm currently near the end of the fourth book of this series, but I decided to rewrite the story and will no longer update for this storyline, but I will keep the books up to be read

Allegiances

EchoClan

Normal body shape: long sturdy legs, long tails, large flat paws, curled claws, hard pads, short body length, broad haunches, large chest

Leader:

Acornstar- brown-orange she-cat with amber-brown eyes

Deputy:

Eagleclaw- light brown she-cat with lighter belly, chest, paws, and muzzle, has pale green eyes

Medicine Cat:

Mossrain- small gray tom with hazel eyes, has a white patch over one ear and eye, apprentice Ravenpaw

Ravenpaw- lithe black tom with large owl-like yellow eyes with a lean face and muzzle, mentor Mossrain

Warriors:

Maskdapple- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with a black patch over her eyes and muzzle, apprentice Firepaw

Oakcloud- handsome brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Boulderclaw- large thick-furred gray tom with white lower half, tail tip, chest, throat, and muzzle, has brilliant shining green eyes, apprentice Blossompaw

Grayblaze- large gray tom with yellow eyes

Silverstrike- silver tom with white lower half, chest, throat, and muzzle, has blue eyes, apprentice Flamepaw

Frostfall- thick-furred white she-cat with blue eyes, deaf in one ear, apprentice Featherpaw

Snowfern- small lithe white she-cat with black face, tail, legs, and ears, has icy blue-green eyes

Rain- gray tabby tom with white unders and blue eyes

Foxpounce- ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes, apprentice Jaypaw

Stonecoat- large gray tom with green eyes

Shadefur- large gray tom with green eyes

Pebblepeak- gray tabby tom with white front paws, has yellow eyes, apprentice Willowpaw

Thorntail- brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Brightflower- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with blue-green eyes

Petaldust- tortoiseshell-and-white tom with green eyes

Apprentices:

Flamepaw- fiery tabby tom with dark amber eyes, mentor Silverstrike

Featherpaw- dark fiery tabby she-cat with bright amber eyes, mentor Frostfall

Firepaw- dark fiery red-brown tom with yellow eyes, mentor Maskdapple

Blossompaw- thick-furred white she-cat with silver back and top of head, has light green eyes, mentor Boulderclaw

Willowpaw- lithe white she-cat with black legs, ears, face, and tail, has large ice-blue eyes, mentor Pebblepeak

Jaypaw- thick-furred white tom with pale gray lower legs, ears, face, and tail, has pale green eyes, mentor Foxpouce

Queens:

Goldenpool- large dark golden tabby she-cat with golden eyes, mother of Dustkit, Heatherkit, and Stormkit, mate Oakcloud

Kits:

Dustkit- dusty brown tom with light golden-brown eyes

Heatherkit- brown-golden tabby she-kit with brown eyes

Stormkit- small solid brown tabby she-kit with golden eyes

Maple- light ginger she-kit with yellow eyes, has white front paws

Elders:

Dappletail- dull tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with dull gray-green eyes

BatClan

Normal body shape: large chests, broad shoulders, short legs, thick paws, webbed toes, sleek short fur, small ears, large eyes

Leader:

Dawnstar- pretty tan tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes

Deputy:

Clovertail- light brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Medicine Cat:

Sandflight- tan she-cat with hazel eyes

Warriors:

Brackenfoot- almost-black brown tom with dark brown eyes

Brownear- brown tom with brown eyes, missing one complete ear, apprentice Wishpaw

Hawktail- dark brown tabby tom with brown eyes and a white chest and front paws

Aspenheart- gray she-cat with bright amber eyes

Hickoryclaw- black tom with yellow eyes

Leafpelt- black she-cat with bushy fur and green eyes, apprentice Carppaw

Bloomcloud- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes, apprentice Blazepaw

Juniperfur- tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes

Duskfang – White tom with green eyes, apprentice Frondpaw

Hazelfur – Light brown she-cat with yellow eyes, temporary apprentice Ratpaw

Birchsplash- white tom with large black blotches and yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Ratpaw- solid brown tom with bright amber eyes and a long, thin tail, mentor Hazelfur

Blazepaw- brown tom with brown eyes, mentor Bloomcloud

Carppaw- brown tom with green eyes, mentor Leafpelt

Frondpaw- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes, mentor Duskfang

Wish- ginger she-cat with yellow eyes, pale orange paws, belly, chest, and muzzle, mentor Brownear

Queens:

Ashbreeze- speckled gray she-cat with white lower half, has blue eyes, mother of Bluekit, Bramblekit, and Breamkit, mate Brackenfoot

Rainsong- silver tabby she-cat with white paws, chest, belly, and muzzle, has blue eyes, mother of Flintkit, mate of Hickoryclaw

Kits:

Bluekit- blue-gray she-kit with white lower half and blue eyes

Breamkit- light brown tomkit with brown eyes

Bramblekit- dark brown tomkit with brown eyes

Fernkit- small gray she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Meadowkit- gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Primkit- solid brown she-cat with bright amber eyes

Flintkit- gray tomkit with yellow eyes

Hopekit- light ginger tabby she-kit with yellow eyes

Elders:

Lakeshine- small silver tabby she-cat with light graying blue eyes and white belly, paws, chest, muzzle, and tail tip

SageClan

Normal body shape: short, dense fur, large ears, long thin legs, small paws, lithe body, thin flanks, small chest

Leader:

Robinstar- small tom with cream-colored fur, white lower half and yellow eyes

Deputy:

Dewnose- black she-cat with brown eyes

Medicine Cat:

Poppysong- tan-brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Cindershade- blue-gray she-cat with green eyes

Brookfern- thick-furred brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Briarcloud- thick-furred light brown she-cat with lighter front paws and yellow eyes

Haretail- stubby-legged brown she-cat with stubby tail and lighter paws and muzzle, has brown eyes

Cloudleap- white she-cat with amber eyes

Gorsedust- gray tabby tom with brown eyes

Amberbreeze- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with yellow eyes, apprentice Sparrowpaw

Sorrelfoot- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Flutteringfire- mostly-white tortoiseshell with green eyes

Pouncefoot- dark ginger tom with dark amber eyes

Swiftrunner- white tom with large black patches and yellow eyes

Squirrelleap- red-brown she-cat with green eyes

Pikefrost – Ginger tabby tom with blue eyes

Bumbleflight - Black tom with one white paw and hazel eyes

Ivypelt - Cream she-cat with a white muzzle and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sparrowpaw – White tom with yellow eyes, mentor Amberbreeze

Lightningpaw - thick-furred golden tabby tom with green eyes

Lilypaw - Light gray she-cat with darker grey patches and blue eyes

Queens:

Shadowmist - Black she-cat with pale yellow eyes, mother of Barkkit and Icekit, mate Robinstar

Hailsong – pale gray tabby she-cat with green eyes, mother of Owkkit, Honeykit, and Elmkit, mate Pouncefoot

Kits:

Barkkit - brown tom with yellow eyes

Icekit - White she-cat with small light brown patches and amber eyes

Owlkit- gray tabby tom with green eyes

Honeykit- ginger tabby she-kit with amber eyes

Elmkit- gray tom with green eyes

Elders:

Weaselclaw- short-legged gray tom with clouding green eyes

CrowClan

Normal body shape: small bodies, short necks, short legs, dense thick fur, large claws, large teeth

Leader:

Whitestar- white she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy:

Roseclaw- russet she-cat with amber eyes, apprentice Sunpaw

Medicine Cat:

Hawkstream- ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Sedgeflower- tawny she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Heatherpool- ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Larkfur- gray tabby tom with green eyes

Alderfern- brown tom with brown eyes

Rushfur- light brown tom with light brown eyes

Reedtail- long-tailed brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Pinefeather – Dark brown tom with darker brown stripes and yellow eyes

Thrushflight – Dark brown tabby tom with blue eyes.

Nightspark – Black tom with a white muzzle, chest, and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sunpaw- golden-brown tabby tom with golden eyes, mentor Roseclaw

Leopardpaw- pretty tan she-cat with darker blotches, has yellow eyes

Queens:

Cedarbreeze- ginger she-cat with amber eyes, kits are Oakkit and Daisykit, mate is Nightspark

Fawnriver- light brown she-cat with long thick tail and white lower legs, muzzle, inside ears, tail tip, belly, and muzzle, hazel eyes, kits are Mistkit, Otterkit, Twigkit

Kits:

Oakkit- ginger tom with amber eyes

Daisykit- black she-cat with white chest and amber eyes

Mistkit- gray she-kit with white paws, has yellow eyes

Otterkit- light brown tabby she-kit with hazel eyes

Twigkit- light brown she-kit with green eyes

Elders:

Splashtail- gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Prologue

Blossompaw was laying in her nest, head on her paws, watching with cold eyes as Mossrain and Ravenpaw padded quietly from the den, believing her to be asleep. She knew it must have something to do with that newcomer, Rain, who had arrived with Ravenpaw just a little earlier in the day. They obviously didn't want her to know they were leaving.

Foolish, *she thought, thinking bad of them just because they hadn't looked back to check whether her eyes were open or closed.*

As foolish as you, *a scathing voice in her head whispered.*

She curled her claws into her nest, trying to block out the sound, but it was loud in her ears, ringing around her head.

As foolish as attacking that dog, *another whispered mockingly.* Getting stuck in a nest because you wanted to save a medicine cat, *it laughed.*

Family makes you weak, *the first growled.* I remember killing my own brother.

Blossompaw shivered, wanting to scratch at her ears. Maybe that would stop the horrible voices that plagued her every day.

Such a weak kit, *laughed a new voice.*

She should go cuddle back with her traitor mother! *the second chuckled.*

The BatClan rat? *questioned the first.* Oh, do you think the kit knows she's half frog?

Is it true? *Blossompaw asked herself, wondering if she could trust such voices. But hadn't she heard something about BatClan? Wasn't that why Grayblaze had attacked her mother just a moon ago, because Snowfern had defended BatClan?*

Such a smart kit, *teased the first voice.*

"Enough!"

At first, Blossompaw thought the voice was in her head, but then she realized there was someone standing by her nest. She flinched, pain running down her spine, when she realized the cat was none she had seen before. She was a strikingly beautiful gray she-cat with white paws, chest, belly, and muzzle. Her eyes were a glowing dark blue, and though her fur was a little ragged, she still had the slim grace of a powerful warrior. But, most noticeably, she was transparent, though no stars littered her pelt. Instead, it seemed rather dark and shadowed, like she had been hiding away in a dark forest without the sun touching her coat for countless moons.

"Who... Who are you?" Blossompaw whispered, trying to bring enough courage into her chest to cry out a warning.

Such a scared kit, *mocked one of the voices.*

"Quiet!" growled the apparition. "This apprentice does not need you in her head. Begone!"

Blossompaw expected to hear their snarky replies, but they were quiet. "What... What did you do?" she whispered.

"I sent them away," the gray she-cat replied. "They were wrong to taunt you, when you are obviously so troubled."

Blossompaw looked at her with terror, but also with the tiniest bit of hope in her chest. Her voice was so smooth, so caring. "Are you from StarClan?"

The she-cat sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. Blossompaw was sad to see such a beautiful gaze so tormented. "I am not. I wish I was, but I made mistakes in life that I am forced to make up for in death, so I am not allowed to be with my Clanmates in never-ending greenleaf, chasing countless mice and voles and listening to a warm breeze in the trees." There was a wistful tone in her voice. "Instead, I am forced to dwell in a dreadful, dark place, full of misery and despair and cats looking for a redemption that will never come. The cats that spoke in your mind live

in this place with me but have been driven mad by countless moons of loneliness. They were able to get into your head because of the strife in your mind. You are as lost as they are, and they wanted to use you to do awful things."

"I'm... Lost? Is that bad?" Blossompaw whispered, her eyes wide with a silent plead for a truthful answer.

"No, my dear, it's not bad at all." The she-cat moved close, running her cold tail along Blossompaw's back, bringing no warmth to the apprentice, but she was strangely comforted. "Every cat gets lost, you just sooner than others. But how could you not, with your life?" She paused for a small moment for Blossompaw to comment, but she was waiting desperately for the cat to go on. "You are loved less than your littermates, and none of your Clanmates truly understand you. But I do, and I can help you. I can make you a great, great warrior, one to be looked upon with admiration."

"But... My injury... I won't be able to walk for ages..." Blossompaw felt despair growing in her chest. This cat, this amazing *cat, was offering her something remarkable, but she would have no way to actually train with her for at least a moon, probably more. "I won't become a warrior until way after I'm supposed too..."*

"I can change that," the she-cat answered softly. "It would be hard, but I could heal you. You would still be sore for some days, but your back would be back to normal, and you'd be training before you knew it."

"Really?" Blossompaw looked at her with a desperate gleam. "Oh, please, I'll do anything!"

"Easy, Blossompaw," the she-cat whispered. "If I help you, you must promise to help me. I want to prove myself to StarClan, to show them I can belong with them, as an honored warrior. And to do that, I want to help you bring an age of happiness and prosperity to EchoClan. You must do what I say, and believe me when I say it's for the greater good of everybody."

"I will!" Blossompaw breathed in aspiration. "I will, I swear! I'll do anything!"

"I'm glad," the she-cat responded softly. "But we can't go much farther without you knowing my name. I'm sure you've heard stories of me, and though they are likely true, my reasons are different. As a young warrior, I saw a Clan that needed my help, that needed to be better. I did things I shouldn't have and was blamed for things I didn't do. Everything I did was to help my Clanmates, even if it hurt me. My kits died when they were quite young, and it changed me... It was heartbreaking, but I forced myself past it to help my Clan. But my mate, my darling mate... He thought I had killed them myself, on purpose, *to further my gain... He wasn't right in the head, my poor dear... He turned my Clan against me and watched them tear me apart then took over as leader... The Clan has been going down since then..." She had such a thick emotion in her voice Blossompaw wished she could comfort her.*

"I won't judge you," Blossompaw meowed. "Whoever you are, I promise, I'll know you did what you did for a good reason."

The she-cat looked up with sad eyes. "My name is Brookstar."

For a moment, Blossompaw didn't know what to say. Of course she had heard the story. When she had been forced to clean Dappletail's nest, the elder had spoken about the old leader without the apprentice asking. But she had enjoyed such a peaceful talk, with no judgment on why she was there.

"I'm sorry all that happened to you," Blossompaw meowed finally. Relief flooded in Brookstar's gaze.

"Thank you, young one," she whispered. "I'm truly glad you understand."

"Will you heal me now?" Blossompaw pleaded. "Please, I just want free of this nest."

Brookstar purred softly. "I know you trust me, but I need to know if I can trust you. Though I wish I could believe you with just your word, I need more than that."

"But what can I do, stuck in this stupid nest?" the apprentice asked. "I'll do anything I can!"

Brookstar seemed to think for a moment, opened her mouth, then shut it

again, hesitating. Finally, she meowed quietly, though she knew no one could overhear, "there's a cat, in EchoClan, who cannot live here anymore. She is suffering, forcing the Clan into darkness, and needs to be taken care of. She needs to go, so we can leave tragedy behind and start moving forward."

"Who? Acornstar?" Blossompaw felt a small swirl of hate in her chest when she mentioned her leader. She was an awful cat, doing nothing to help their Clan. "How could I get rid of her?"

"Not Acornstar," Brookstar meowed calmly. "At least, not yet. She is ruining our Clan, but that will be over soon. No, this cat is just a normal warrior, but she is dragging down our future. We will continue to look to the past for vengeance because of her, and she is distracting the medicine cats from doing their job."

"But medicine cats are weak!" Blossompaw objected.

"They are a way of life," Brookstar meowed. "They are necessary for our continued survival."

Blossompaw looked down, forcing herself to nod. She didn't know if she believed Brookstar just yet, but she had to trust her. This long-dead leader was the first cat to truly believe in her, and she wouldn't let the she-cat down. "Who is it?" she finally asked.

Brookstar trailed her gaze away, to the prone figure of Russetdawn, laying still in her nest as always. "The Clan will mourn her, but we will continue to look to the past as we try everything we can to bring her back. But she will waste away in that nest for the rest of time, never to open her eyes again, but also never to let go of life." She looked at Blossompaw. "She needs to cross to StarClan, but she needs the help of the living. She needs your *help, Blossompaw. You can let her rest in peace."*

"You... You want me to... kill *Russetdawn?"*

Brookstar sighed, blinking softly. "I'm sorry, my dear, I know it sounds hard. But I need to know you'll stay with me, through everything I may ask you to do. This will likely be the hardest I ever ask. I promise, if you do this for me, you will be healed soon. And then I will train you when

you sleep, and soon you will become the best apprentice, then the best warrior, in your Clan. I swear, if you trust me, one day, I will make you leader of EchoClan. You will be Blossomstar, and with you there will be a great new era, one of peace for all of those you find worthy. But first, you must send Russetdawn to StarClan."

Blossompaw stared at her in admiration. "Okay," she whispered. "I'll do it."

Pride shone in Brookstar's gaze. "Then go, now."

And so, watching the she-cat for just a moment more, Blossompaw dug her claws into her nest, dragging herself forward. Pain gripped her spine, twisting in her skin like sharp thorns. She gritted her teeth together, growling to herself, and continued to force her body forward, back legs splayed out behind her.

"Yes! Go, go!" Brookstar urged. "Your entire future is ahead of you, you just need to crawl to it!"

And so Blossompaw urged herself on, claws scraping against the ground. With every drag of her body she felt agonizing pain, but in her mind she couldn't help but picture herself standing above her Clanmates on the Rock Pile, white coat as bright as could be, the silver on her back reflecting beautiful sunlight, and her green eyes strong as she gazed down at her warriors. For my future, *she thought, thinking of how proud her parents would be, seeing their shining eyes looking up at her with the same loving look they so often gave Ravenpaw, the perfect kit.*

The stone scraped against her stomach uncomfortably, but she continued moving forward, getting closer and closer to Russetdawn's nest. The she-cat was still as ever, sides moving slowly and unevenly, eyes fluttering weakly.

And before Blossompaw even realized, she was at Russetdawn's nest. She looked back to Brookstar, worry in her gaze, but the she-cat was silent, nodding her on slowly. So Blossompaw looked back at Russetdawn, lying so small in the nest.

"Don't spill blood, make it seem she died on her own. Your Clanmates won't understand, you see..."

So Blossompaw sheathed her claws, brought a paw slowly toward the she-cat's neck, and began to press down. Soft at first, but then harder, listening to her gasp for breath, eyelids twitching, whiskers quivering, ears flicking. She started to choke, struggling to get a breath in her lungs. But there was nothing, her throat closed because of the apprentice's paw tight against her neck, right under her chin. Her breathing got shallow and slow, continuing its slow decline until there was no breath in her body at all.

Blossompaw stared down at the limp body, while Brookstar gazed over at the apprentice, a dark look in her gaze. Finally, *the long-dead cat thought to herself.* A new follower to carry out my every command. And so trusting, too... *Excitement flared in her gaze.* She thinks she's so unloved, yet it's quite the opposite. With my guidance, she'll never truly open her eyes. *Brookstar suddenly struggled to hold in a laugh.* A mistake of your own making, Boulderclaw. Perhaps you should've watched your daughter a tad closer. Now, she takes her rightful place by my side, and will become what you *never* could be.

Chapter One

"I just... I don't understand," Mossrain murmured, touching a paw softly on Blossompaw's back. "This shouldn't be possible."

"I don't know what you're feeling for," Blossompaw growled at him, shifting away. "My back is fine. Can I start training again?"

"Certainly not!" Goldenpool called from where she was redressing the cobwebs on Brightflower's side. The blood continued to flow despite constant care. "This is something entirely new to us. We need to talk about this before we decide anything."

"But I'm fine!" Blossompaw stood up quickly but flinched almost immediately.

"Obviously," Mossrain sighed sarcastically. "Listen, Blossompaw, you may be healed, but you're still sore, and we need to see if this is permanent or temporary. You may be in shock or something."

"I told you, I feel fine! I'd be much better if I wasn't still stuck in this den!"

"Blossompaw, please..." Ravenpaw stared at his sister with a weak expression, fear obvious in his gaze.

"Shut--" Blossompaw cut off her growl and looked at her paws. More quietly, she murmured, "shut up, Ravenpaw. You don't know anything."

He lowered his gaze, sadness piercing his heart.

"Just because your upset doesn't mean you have to take it out on others," Mossrain told her firmly. "With an attitude like that, I'd be surprised if any of the apprentices want you back." Ravenpaw looked up at Mossrian's harsh tone, seeing the shock in Blossompaw's own gaze. "The quicker you smarten up to the fact

that nobody likes you when you act like this, the better. Now lay down and let your back get better. I'll give you exercises soon. I have other cats to take care of, I don't need to be fluttering over your nest like a worried butterfly." The young medicine cat stood up on stiff paws and added sharply, "you won't be leaving this den until I say you're ready. And I don't plan on letting you go until your hiss is as quiet as Ravenpaw's. So why don't you work on healing your head as much as your back."

With a lash of his tail, the gray tom turned on his paws and went to Maskdapple, who watched her son with a surprised expression, as was everybody else. Even Blossompaw had fallen quiet, looking after Mossrain with shock.

Ravenpaw was almost proud.

Goldenpool was the first to shake herself from her surprise. "Ravenpaw, why don't you recheck Silverstrike's leg? I see some blood soaking the moss. Check his other wounds, too, but if the cobwebs are clean don't remove them. We're running quite low."

"Yes, Goldenpool," he mewed softly, getting to his paws and going across the den. He couldn't help but look at all the moss thrown around. He was still shaking slightly from when his Clan had filed into the den after the battle, but then again, it was only earlier in the day. Because the den had been so crowded, many cats had been allowed to go back to the warriors' den, though Grayblaze, Brightflower, Silverstrike, Maskdapple, and Frostfall were still in their nests. Soon, though, Mossrain or Goldenpool would go to check on the injured cats resting in their dens.

"How's my ear?" Silverstrike asked gruffly when Ravenpaw sat in front of him, a small amount of cobwebs in his jaws. "It feels.. weird."

Ravenpaw looked nervously at the tom's face. One of his ears had been completely destroyed, leaving only a rough, torn piece of flesh. It seems like a SageClan cat had bitten Silverstrike's ear and completely tore it off. *I wonder if he swallowed any of it...* Ravenpaw shivered in disgust.

"Is it that bad?" Silverstrike did his best to look up at it, but to no avail.

"Oh, no, sorry, I was... just thinking..." He slowly began to remove the cobwebs from Silverstrike's leg, where a drying paste of goldenrod was covering the bite wounds that had sunken deep into his flesh. Maybe from the same warrior who took his ear.

"Fair enough," Silverstrike muttered, flicking his one good ear. "Ouch!" he hissed suddenly as Ravenpaw began wrapping his leg with cobwebs.

"Sorry," he said quickly, flattening his ears in embarrassment.

"It's fine," Silverstrike sighed, resting his head down. "Can't believe I got all these wounds for nothing," he added quietly.

"So... you regret the battle?" Ravenpaw asked softly. Silverstrike turned his head to look at him, still resting it against the edge of the nest.

"I regret letting Acornstar make my daughter and son warriors. If they hadn't been so tired after staying up all night, they would've fought better, and Brightflower wouldn't be struggling to survive in a nest." He looked at his daughter with a suddenly soft expression, the softest Ravenpaw had ever seen from the grumpy tom. "Acornstar has gone too far. They weren't ready. She's not my leader anymore. I will never listen to another thing she says."

Ravenpaw didn't know what to say, so he stayed quiet. He finished Silverstrike's leg, checked on his injured tail and scratched pad, then left him alone.

"I need to check on my kits. Ravenpaw, come hold down these cobwebs, I'll be back in just a moment." Goldenpool waited until his paws took over hers, then she hurried from the den.

"I didn't know a wound could hurt this much," Brightflower murmured.

"It'll be better soon," Ravenpaw answered softly.

"Hopefully..." She weakly turned her head to look at him in the eyes, her blue-green gaze glazed over in pain. "Do you think it was a mistake to make me a warrior?" When he swallowed awkwardly, she sighed and lay her head down again. "I heard Silverstrike," she told him, staring at her father across the den, looking like he had fallen asleep. "He's right, you know. I wasn't ready, I knew I wasn't. And being forced to stay awake all night, then rush into battle... I thought I would lose my life... I still might..."

Ravenpaw looked at his paws, which were still holding the cobwebs against her bleeding side, but blood was beginning to seep through, wetting his soft pads and leaking down to her nest. "You won't die," he promised her softly. "We'll all do whatever we can. I swear to StarClan, you're not leaving us yet."

Brightflower let out a slow breath. "Thank you, Ravenpaw. Thank you..." her voice went quiet, and she stared blankly forward, lost in her own mind.

"Ravenpaw, I need some cobwebs!" Mossrain called harshly from where he was crouched over Grayblaze, pressing blood-red cobwebs against the large gray tom's leg, ears flat against his head. The cobwebs didn't seem to be doing much, and quite a bit of blood was beginning to come from under the tom's delicate paws.

"But I have to hold Brightflower's side! It's bleeding really badly..." He hated mentioning that in front of the young she-cat, but wanted Mossrain to know he truly didn't have a choice.

"Fox-dung!" Mossrain hissed. He looked around the den, looking a little anxious. "Goldenpool!" he called out into the clearing, but there was no answer, even after quite a few moments. Flicking his tail, he turned to Blossompaw and said firmly, "go get Goldenpool from the nursery, tell her we need her back in here now. Don't make me regret this."

Eyes blazing with excitement, Blossompaw struggled to her paws, winching slightly, and headed for the den entrance. She limped slightly, baring her teeth in pain, and disappeared.

"Is he okay?" Ravenpaw asked, flicking his ears anxiously, trying to

spy more of the tom's wounds. He was rather close, with only Frostfall between Grayblaze and Brightflower, and Ravenpaw could see all the cobwebs pressed against his thick pelt were darkened with blood.

"Whoever attacked him broke a claw in his leg. I was trying to take it out and I think either my claw or the broken claw severed something that's causing a lot of blood flow." Looking a little desperate, Mossrain gripped some moss in one paw and quickly used it to replace the useless cobwebs, tossing them aside. Instantly, Grayblaze's discarded blood began to leak from the webs, spreading over the cold stone ground.

"What's going to happen to my leg?" Grayblaze growled angrily, looking down at his injury, and his leg twitched slightly with his movement. He hissed in pain, watching the moss do almost nothing to keep the blood inside.

"It'll heal, it'll just take longer than normal."

Grayblaze growled deep in his throat and rested his head down again. He blinked his eyes, looking tired and weak. "Well, get it fixed."

Even as he spoke, Goldenpool hurried into the den. She barely paused to look at Grayblaze before hurrying to the front of the herb storage, pawing at their tiny piles that were ready for use. She grabbed all the cobwebs, dropped half next to Mossrain, then took the rest for herself. She jerked her head for Ravenpaw to move, and quickly replaced the old cobwebs with the new ones.

Blossompaw returned then, wincing with every pace, and she almost seemed grateful to collapse into her nest, letting out a long sigh. "You're welcome," she huffed to Mossrain with a sour tone.

He continued to focus on Grayblaze, but meowed after a moment, "If that was hard for you, you definitely shouldn't start training yet."

Her eyes flashed, and her tail lashed. "I was looking for a thank you!"

"Well, you're not getting one." Mossrain jumped to his paws and hurried to the storage, pawing at the small pile of goldenrod. He picked through the yellow flowers then padded back to Grayblaze, dropping them down next to his nest and beginning to peel the cobwebs from the tom's thick-furred stomach. Ravenpaw padded closer, seeing that the long gray fur was mixed with the broken flesh, stuck inside the fleshy wound. The tom's leg was still bleeding, but the new cobwebs were holding it in pretty well. Mossrain was likely waiting for it to slow to work on it further.

Snorting angrily, Blossompaw put her head fiercely onto the side of her nest. "Mossrain, what do you want me to do?" Ravenpaw asked, scuffing the ground with his paw.

"We're completely out of cobwebs and comfrey roots, and those few last goldenrod leaves are unusable. I need you to go out and get cobwebs from inside trees and wherever else you can find them, then go onto the moor to get goldenrod. Comfrey can wait. Bring a cat or two with you, so you can carry more."

"I'll ask Willowpaw and Snowfern," Ravenpaw answered immediately.

"Snowfern's back leg is pretty clawed up. I would suggest Boulderclaw, Stoneocat, or Shadefur, if you want another family member, that is." Mossrain didn't look at him as he worked, paws working quickly and skillfully.

Before Ravenpaw could agree, Acornstar barged into the den, her eyes flaming. Eagleclaw hurried after her, looking worried. "Please, just calm down!" the deputy said to her mother, tail twitching.

Mossrain looked over instantly, swallowing heavily and flattening his ears.

"How is she healed?" Acornstar growled, looking from Mossrain to Goldenpool with a dark look in her gaze. Then her sharp amber-brown eyes snapped to Blossompaw, and she stalked forward with stiff legs. "How? How are you healed? Tell me!"

Blossompaw's eyes went wide, and though she opened her mouth

slightly, no sound came out. "It's a miracle," Goldenpool said softly, walking over on soft paws stained with blood. Behind her, Brightflower was drifting softly into sleep, with Silverstrike watching her from his nest, eyes like a hawk.

"No..." Acornstar softly shook her head, taking a slow step back. "There is no way. StarClan is not this forgiving, not this graceful. They would *never* heal a cat like this... They take every chance they can to make us join their ranks... They would not heal an apprentice without reason, *especially* this one..."

Blossompaw looked at her nest, ears drooping downward. Ravenpaw felt his paws twitch, and he almost went forward to tell his leader off and comfort his sister, but then he remembered that Acornstar *was his leader,* and Blossompaw wouldn't want his help anyway.

"Perhaps StarClan is giving her a second chance," Mossrain growled. "Like you should."

Ravenpaw was slightly surprised that is was Mossrain speaking about second chances with Blossompaw, especially because of what he had said to the young apprentice earlier.

"StarClan does not give second chances!" Acornstar hissed.

"They gave you one," Goldenpool meowed softly. "You remember, don't you? You were a young warrior, I just an apprentice. An eagle dived on the camp, grabbed a kit. You attacked it, launching onto its back with the biggest leap I have ever seen, even today. It dropped the kit and you dived after them, wrapping your body around him. I remember you hitting the ground, protecting that kit with everything you had. Buzzardcloud was sure you'd die, all that damage in your body, you couldn't move a muscle. But the next day, you were completely healed. It was a gift from StarClan that saved you that day, after risking your life for his."

"Of course I remember!" Acornstar snapped, looking hurt. "I named my own kit after that day!"

Eagleclaw's eyes widened in shock, and she lowered her head,

scratching her claws over the ground. She had obviously never heard the story of her name before.

"So don't you think it's possible StarClan could've given Blossompaw a new chance, just like you?" Goldenpool's eyes were soft, caring, so different from the many other times she had stared at her leader in these recent times. "Remember, she would not be alive if you had not saved Boulderclaw on that day."

Ravenpaw stared at the golden tabby in shock. Was that true? Did Acornstar almost die to save his own father's life? Sudden regret pierced his heart. So many times he had wished Acornstar did not lead his Clan, but yet she had risked everything to save another. She was a warrior, a hero--the reason he was alive. She had gone through so much, almost dying just to watch her mate and sister die themselves, only to be seen as a monster by her own Clan. For the first time, Ravenpaw was seeing the cat behind the mask. Not an insane, broken leader, but a depressed warrior wishing for the days she still had everything.

"That does not mean StarClan healed her..." When Acornstar finally spoke, it was soft and low, and she was watching her paws. But then she brought her gaze back to the wide-eyed apprentice lying in the nest before her. "You should have not been healed--it would've been for the greater good of everybody if you stayed injured."

There was a look in Blossompaw's eyes Ravenpaw couldn't begin to describe. The fear, the disbelief, twisting and turning in her terrified gaze as she stared at the cat who was supposed to be her leader. But somehow Ravenpaw knew it wasn't the talk of how she shouldn't have been healed that was truly scaring Blossompaw, but instead... something else. Something else in that tiny sentence, one of those words, that meant something to her. Was it the speak of this "greater good"? Were those words the reason absolute agony was tearing through his sister's eyes, making her fur stand on end and her whiskers tremble?

Acornstar took a few steps back, once again shaking her head. "No... No... Not again, not again... *No!*" Turning on her paws, Acornstar fled from the den, shoving Eagleclaw aside without a thought. The deputy stumbled, then turned to look at her disappearing mother

with a desperate look in her eyes.

"Why won't you let me help you?" she whispered. "Why won't you tell me what's wrong?"

I'm so happy to have the story back! I'm really excited to finally get the plot truly moving.

Question #1: What do you think of the story so far?

Question #2: Any theories/questions about any of the cats' future, such as Blossompaw or Acornstar?

Chapter Two

"Ravenpaw... Why don't you go get those cobwebs and goldenrod now?" Mossrain spoke softly, nervously. "We'll, uh, be here. Working." Getting to his paws, he pattered over to Grayblaze's nest, sitting uncomfortably on the cold stone.

"Stormkit was getting antsy with Oakcloud when I was at the nursery, he didn't know how to play catch-the-tail right... I should go check in with them. Send a cat if you need me." Swallowing, Goldenpool went to the den entrance, stopping next to Eagleclaw. "Let's get out of here, okay?" She rested her tail on the deputy's shoulders and led her from the den.

"I guess I'll go, too. I'll try to come back soon, okay?" Ravenpaw looked worriedly at Mossrain, trying not to turn his gaze to Blossompaw, no matter how much he wanted to.

"Spend some time with your family, Ravenpaw. Take all the time you need. But be safe out there." Mossrain's eyes glowed briefly at him, soft and caring, yet still dark with thought from what had happened earlier with Acornstar.

"Always," he promised, going over and touching the tom's muzzle with his own, then he left the den on soft paws. Outside, the sun was high in the sky, shining cold light down on him. He fluffed his fur, shivering at the icy air. The clearing was empty, and though there was fresh prey on the fresh-kill pile, it looked quite empty.

Hunger clawed at his belly, and he went over and quickly swallowed a juicy, sweet-tasting mouse before heading for the apprentices' den, still licking blood from his muzzle. He slipped inside, the thick dirt walls suffocating yet warmer than the outside air, and went into the small den. The moss smelled sharp and dry, mingled with the fading scents of the apprentices he had grown up with. He could still faintly smell Petaldust and Brightflower from the back nests where they used to sleep.

He checked the spot where they hung out sometimes, the small dip in the ground with the small tunnel leading to it, but it was empty as well. There were no apprentices here. Flicking his tail, he left the den and emerged into the sunlight.

Guess I'll just go on my own, Ravenpaw thought a little sadly. *I'll get the goldenrod first and bring it back to camp, then get the cobwebs. Maybe Willowpaw will be back by then.* He headed for the moorland entrance, but he had barely started down the rocks when he realized there was a familiar scent trailing down the rocks. *Snowfern? She shouldn't be out of camp!* Anxiety clawed at his stomach, and he continued sniffing, finding another, less familiar scent there. It was Rain. Why had the two left camp together? He knew Snowfern was to train Rain, but surely not while she was injured?

Swallowing with worry, Ravenpaw hurried down the rocks. *Okay, I'll see what Snowfern is doing and get her back to camp, then I'll get the goldenrod.*

He made it to the soft, cold moorland grass, and followed the scent trail left by the two cats. Surprisingly, it was heading in the direction of the goldenrod itself. No, not the herbs--the burial place. He saw their two shapes sitting by the place his ancestors had been buried for generations. Now knowing where he was going, he quickened his step, racing across the moorland, rushed to get to his mother.

But as he neared, he slowed, wanting to catch his breath. But he was still panting lightly as he got close. "Hello, Ravenpaw," Rain called without looking around. Snowfern jumped slightly, twisting her head to look back.

"Ravenpaw!" Excitement shined in her gaze, and she stood, limping over to him. She tried to touch his nose, but he made sure to instead press his muzzle against her's instead, not wanting to see her future. He had gotten rather good at not peeking into other cats' memories, and he wanted to keep it that way.

"What are you doing out of camp? You shouldn't be walking with that leg." Unable to help himself, he went forward and sniffed at his

mother's back leg, nosing the cobwebs softly. It smelled fine, but there was the slightest tint of color. Walking had made it bleed again, but only lightly.

"Rain wanted to see where Tumble was buried," Snowfern answered softly. "I was the only cat currently at camp willing to bring him. Goldenpool is watching Maple." The white and black she-cat turned back to the flattened dirt. No grass had grown on the site yet, though Berrywhisker's was slowing being covered.

"Snowfern says you chose where to bury him?" Rain asked softly, still staring at the tiny mound. "Next to one of your kin?"

Ravenpaw sat next to him, twisting his tail over his paws. "Berrywhisker, my father's mother. I wish I had been closer to her. I didn't even remember we were kin until right before she died. But I still see her."

"You do?" Rain and Snowfern spoke at the same time, and Ravenpaw's mother settled on his other side, sitting close enough her fur brushed against his. He was comforted by the feeling of her short, dense coat.

"In StarClan. She was there when I met Violetfrost, when she told me about you." Rain stiffed at the mention of her name.

"Violetfrost? Like a warrior?" Snowfern's fur rippled.

Ravenpaw winced. "Uh..." He hated lying to his mother, but he knew Eagleclaw did not want to worry her Clan with the knowledge of MothClan.

Rain, it seems, was much better at lying. "No, it is not like one of your names. It is two separate ones."

Snowfern let out a relieved sigh. "I'm glad to hear that."

Ravenpaw was happy they had gotten past the subject of the name, but knew he would have to be more careful. Ravenpaw didn't know what to say, and he was worried about spilling a secret with his mother sitting there. With one more simple sentence, he could ruin everything. So he kept his trap shut.

"Snowfern, perhaps you should head back to camp? I would hate for your wound to tire you too much," Rain spoke softly, still gazing at where his son's body was hidden under the ground.

Snowfern seemed to hesitate. "I don't know..."

"You don't worry about me hurting Ravenpaw, do you?" Rain finally turned his gaze to her, blue eyes glowing with faint amusement, but still overlain with grief. "He was the one who brought me to my daughter. By now, I value his life more than my own. I just want to ask him something... Something private."

"Of course I don't think you'd hurt him," Snowfern murmured. "I just... Oh, nevermind. Come back soon." She touched Ravenpaw's ear with her nose, then limped away. Ravenpaw watched his mother's form slowly head away, waiting until she was quite far before looking back at Rain. He didn't even know what to say in front of him, after what he had said. Does he really feel that way? Would he truly die for Ravenpaw? The apprentice hoped he would never find out.

"There are many things that cannot be said in front of her," Rain meowed, looking back at Tumble's grave. "I wish I had met him, even for a moment. I should've never left Violetfrost alone. I thought I would be back in time... I will never forgive myself."

Ravenpaw was quiet for a moment, looking around while thinking of what to say. Then he saw it. The fresh patch of soil not far away, surrounded by the countless other grass-covered mounds. "That grave over there, with no grass on it, that's Russetdawn's," he said softly. "She's the she-cat who just died."

"Goldenpool told me," Rain said softly. "Why bring her up?"

"Well, after she died, her spirit visited me," Ravenpaw explained.

"Spirits do sure visit you often," Rain commented. "I've never seen one, nor have the medicine cats of MothClan. Our ancestors are stuck in Firestar's Forest, never allowed to leave. Does every cat see this StarClan spirits as much as you do?"

"Only medicine cats," Ravenpaw answered. "At least, I think. We see them most often."

"And why did Russetdawn visit you?"

"She wanted me to tell Foxpounce she was ready for death, that she was expecting it." A sudden realization came over Ravenpaw. "I've been so distracted, I've completely forgotten to tell him..."

"I wouldn't," Rain told him. "Hearing about a dead mate, especially one so recently lost... It makes it worse, whatever they may say. I would wait, wait until he truly, truly needs it."

"I guess I should've been gentler when I told you about Violetfrost," Ravenpaw muttered nervously, scratching the ground with his claws.

"Well, I wasn't exactly making it easy on you. But it doesn't matter now, it is in the past."

"Like Tumble and Violetfrost?" Ravenpaw looked at him curiously.

Rain let out a soft snort. "Past cats are different than past actions. Cats... they leave behind memories, or you wish you had more. Actions, they just cause you to walk further along your intended path in life."

"But cats help further it along, too, don't they? After all, my future would be very different without you." It felt weird to say such a thing. But his life had changed drastically since he met Rain, and he knew it would never be the same. Rain had changed his entire life.

"Of course. Every cat you meet changes your life, for better and for worse. I would not be here with you if Violetfrost had never been born, but she would still be alive if *I* had never been born. We were both important parts of each others' stories, like you mine and me yours. Without you, I would've gone the rest of my life without knowing of Maple still living. Without me, you and your Clan would've never known MothClan even existed--unless StarClan told you. Either way, we have helped each other move forward. Every cat you meet, no matter how quickly, is important. Always

remember that."

"I will. Thank you, Rain."

For a moment, both were silent, then Rain said, "you did not finish what you were saying about Russetdawn. The conversation turned in a different direction."

It took Ravenpaw a moment to remember what he was going to say. "Well, Russetdawn was expecting kits when she died. She showed them to me, she named them Hornetkit and Sandkit. She said they weren't meant to live, but yet I still feel sorry that they didn't get to see life. She doesn't want Foxpounce to know, so he isn't tormented by it. I just... I just think maybe Tumble was never meant to live either. From the moment he was born, he was meant to die. I doubt that makes you feel better..."

"To know that your own ancestors might've planned my son's death before he even joined your Clan? No, it does not make me feel better." For a moment, Ravenpaw felt himself sinking into despair, but then the tom, luckily, continued. "But knowing that he is not alone makes me calm inside. That not only does he have Violetfrost, but other kits, too. Maybe he won't feel as alone as I do."

"He has his other sibling, too..."

Rain sighed. "I try not to think about that. They died before Violetfrost, alone in a forest, too young to know anything..."

"StarClan would've taken them. I didn't see them, but I'm sure they did. Your kit was never alone, I promise. And they never will be. Tumble and the first kit will be happy and young forever in an endless greenleaf with countless friends, and Maple will grow beside Stormkit, Heatherkit, and Dustkit." Ravenpaw swallowed the feeling of grief in him. He knew Dustkit would die before his apprenticeship.

Why didn't I see Rain or Maple in my visions? Surely he would've seen them when spying in on the future? Perhaps his future had changed, or they just hadn't been there at the moments he saw. *The future is set in stone, is it not?*

"You are surprisingly wise for one so young," Rain commented. "I'm glad to consider you a friend. You remind me a lot of a tom I knew, Robinpaw. He was my denmate."

"He didn't survive past apprenticeship?" Ravenpaw asked softly.

"Sadly, no. I honestly didn't think he would ever make it to a warrior. It seems all the litters when I was born had weak cats; Robinpaw, Maplepaw, Violetfrost, me... my sister... None of us were true warriors. Not completely."

"Maplepaw?" Ravenpaw looked at him in surprise. "You named one of your kits after a denmate?"

"Yes. She was a close friend. She died saving my life from a fox. I told her as she was dying I would always remember her. When I found out Violetfrost was having kits, I told her I wanted to name a she-kit Maple." Rain spoke in a hard voice, like he was trying to pretend it did not hurt him to speak of the past.

Ravenpaw was too curious. "And Robinpaw? How did he die?"

"He lasted longer than I thought he would, in all honesty. All the way to his warrior ceremony, where he was struck down by the rogue he was fighting."

"Do you always have to fight rogues to become warriors?"

"When it gets close to the time of a warrior ceremony, patrols will be sent out to find rogues and street cats and sometimes straying kittypets and drag them to where we keep prisoners, where I was kept myself. Sometimes, we can't find enough, so a warrior is chosen to fight them. These battles are normally a little less bloody, and the warrior will still live afterward--usually."

"Usually?" Ravenpaw swallowed, feeling a strong shiver down his spine.

"Ryefang fought a warrior for his assessment--Falconfeather. Ryefang always went too far, even as a kit. He got lost in the heat of battle and tore out Falconfeather's throat. It seemed brutal to even MothClan warriors. But Mothstar was so proud of the monster she

created. He is just like her, maybe worse. I dread the day RyeClan is born."

Ravenpaw swallowed nervously. "I... There's something I should tell you." Rain looked at him, curious yet faintly worried, and Ravenpaw explained softly, "StarClan told me a danger would come, and... I think it's MothClan. I don't know when, but they'll come."

Rain looked down. "I know. I know they will come. It would be impossible to hide from them forever. But do not worry yourself too much just yet, it'll take time for them to come."

"Are you sure?" Ravenpaw looked at him anxiously. Of course Rain would have an answer--he had been a warrior of MothClan, after all, so he would know better than anyone.

"Yes, I am. Even if they got the same information as I did, had even followed me, it would be moons before they came to attack. They've done it before, before I was born. They find an enemy, and instead of attacking immediately, they gather numbers. They will make more mating partners, have more kits and then wait for them to become warriors. They'll probably have quite a few litters, to be sure they can fight you and win. So, yes, one day you'll have to worry a great deal, but not just yet."

"If we attacked them now, could we win?" Ravenpaw asked.

Rain let out a low breath, eyes narrowed in thought. "Possibly. But it would not be smart to. Best to wait for them to come to you, to fight on your own territory. And one Clan could not beat MothClan alone. All four would have to join together to fight."

Ravenpaw pawed the ground. "I doubt SageClan will have anything to do with us for moons, and BatClan can barely survive, much less fight."

"Then good thing they won't be coming yet." Rain stood up, shaking out his coat. His body had filled out since he joined the Clan, despite it being so recently. He looked strong and powerful, muscles rippling underneath his short coat. If all MothClan cats looked like him, they would most definitely be a deadly enemy. "Let's head

back to camp, shall we? I don't want Maple to wake up without me there."

"Okay," Ravenpaw meowed, getting to his paws and following the large tom across the dense moor. He stopped to grab a mouthful of goldenrod, and Rain was kind enough to offer to carry some as well. So together, their jaws gripping two huge bundles of goldenrod, they headed back to camp. On their way, the sky clouded, and by the time they were stepping up the rocky pathway, snow was beginning to sprinkle their pelts.

They went to the medicine cat's den, finding Mossrain crouched over Grayblaze, holding red cobwebs over the tom's leg. "Thank StarClan! Those will be very useful! How long is left in the day, do you think?" The medicine cat peered over at the den entrance, unable to see out there too well.

"Long enough to get cobwebs," Ravenpaw answered, dropping his goldenrod by the storage. Rain did the same, nodded goodbye to them, then left the den. A twinge of sadness went through Ravenpaw at his departure--he liked the tom, and wanted more stories of MothClan, despite their often dreadful nature.

"Is it snowing?" Mossrain nodded to his white-sprinkled pelt.

"Just a little. If I go quick I'll be able to find enough to last us until tomorrow." Shaking the melting snow from his coat, Ravenpaw bid goodbye to his mentor and headed from the den. He headed for the forest entrance but was quickly stopped by a cat calling him from the clearing.

"Ravenpaw!" Turning, he saw Willowpaw hurrying over to him. "I smelled you in the den, were you looking for me or Jaypaw?"

Ravenpaw was surprised he hadn't noticed Jaypaw wasn't in the den. "I was looking for you, I didn't even think that it was weird that Jaypaw wasn't in there. Do you know where he is? I hope he isn't out while injured... Wait, Flamepaw should be in the den, too! Where are they?"

"Calm down, they're fine," Willowpaw purred, eyes soft.

"Boulderclaw thought it was a good idea for them to go into the elders' den, so Dappletail can keep them company and help keep their spirits up too. I doubt Flamepaw cares much, but I visited Jaypaw and he seemed happy."

A huge relief fluttered from Ravenpaw, taking a great weight from his shoulders. "Thank StarClan! I was worried." He let out a breath, then scruffed his paw over the ground, embarrassed by his quick worry.

"I could tell," Willowpaw purred again, nudging his shoulder. "So what did you need? We don't really get to talk all that often anymore."

"I know, so I was wondering if you wanted to go out and help me get some cobwebs. I mean, if you want too..." What if she didn't want to spend time with him? What if she was beginning to see Blossompaw's point of view, that he was useless and not worth the time?

"Of course I want to, mouse brain!" She touched her nose to his cheek. "I'll just have to ask Pebblepeak, I think he's resting in the warriors' den." She watched Ravenpaw with a soft look before hurrying off towards where she believed her mentor to be.

Ravenpaw tried to hide the feeling welling inside of him. He couldn't help it. Every time he heard Pebblepeak's name, he remembered how he had acted before the battle. Scared, pretending he was feeling sick. Pretending because he had not come into the medicine cats' den, despite Mossrain worriedly asking him if he was okay. Instead, the tom had paced and paced by the moorland entrance, waiting for the patrol to return.

But he had not been anxious for his Clanmates to return, Ravenpaw knew that. He had been terrified for Squirrelleap, his SageClan mate, not for his own Clanmates. *That's* why the tom didn't go. Because he didn't want to hurt the cats that meant something to Squirrelleap.

He could feel something dark rising inside of him. He realized, quite quickly, that it was anger. He was angry with Pebblepeak, because

his family was injured just because the young tom was *scared*. Scared and disloyal.

But suddenly, everything calmed. All that boiling anger was washed away. Because walking back toward him on soft, bouncing paws, was his sister, eyes shining, whiskers twitching. She was happy, and just seeing that look on her face, despite her distress when returning from battle, swept away everything dark in his heart. Because as long as his family was alive and healthy, he would be happy--he would be trusting.

Just not of Pebblepeak.

I hope you enjoyed! I don't really have any questions, but go ahead and comment any thoughts or theories you have.

Chapter Three

"StarClan, I ask you to take care of young Bramblekit. He did not get the chance to live the life he was meant to, but I hope his littermates can. Take him, watch him--watch us." Dawnstar dipped her head to the thin, dull body before her. Ashbreeze dropped her gaze, looking at her paws, before standing suddenly and going back to the nursery. Brackenfoot went forward, gave his dead kit a soft lick on his cheek, then followed his mate with a twitching tail, head down.

After a few moments of respectful silence, Clovertail stood up, shook out her light brown fur, and meowed, "mentors, head out with your apprentices. Try some battle practice then do some hunting. Maybe a big group is what we really need. Juniperfur, can you lead Hawktail and Hickoryclaw on a border patrol, then hunt on your way back?"

"Sure." Juniperfur nodded her head softly and gestured for the two cats. They followed her quietly for the camp entrance.

"Birchsplash, come with me hunting," Clovertail added.

"I'll come with," Dawnstar meowed, stretching out her fur and heading for her deputy.

"Can't I come too?" Brownear grumbled. "Send Withpaw with the others."

Dawnstar turned a cold gaze onto the tom. "Train your own apprentice, Brownear. I gave you Wishpaw to teach you respect for those different than you. If she fails, it's on *you* and nobody else. Now take a bit of responsibility." With a lash of her tail, she nodded to Clovertail and headed for the camp entrance. Birchplash jumped up and followed.

"May I come with?" Aspenheart looked after the three cats with a worried expression.

Clovertail and Dawnstar looked at each other. Both seemed extremely unwilling. "It'll be another set of paws," Birchsplash said softly to them. When they both stayed quiet, he added, "you have to give her a chance, right?"

Clovertail looked away, while Dawnstar lashed her tail and growled, "fine. Keep up, Aspenheart." She turned and headed for the camp entrance, where Juniperfur's patrol had already disappeared into the territory.

"Come on," Leafpelt meowed after a moment. "let's get to the pond." She shook out her bushy black fur and headed after all the other cats.

With a sigh, Rowanpaw forced himself out of his crouch and followed the large group, walking at the back. Blazepaw looked back and slowed enough that they could walk side by side. Feeling his brother's fur against his calmed him just enough so that he could stand to walk alongside the patrol without anger boiling in his belly.

He just wanted to be alone, to watch Hopekit as she struggled to move. She was so small, and just picturing her fluffy ginger pelt sent pains through his heart. She already looked so much like Emberheart, with every stripe just how he remembered it. He wondered if Hopekit's eyes would have that same yellow glow, shining with happiness and, well, hope.

He barely registered the jump down to the marsh but felt the wet ground curl around his paws with disgust. Bile rose in his throat as he looked at the territory around him. The dark trees, the hidden skies, the awful smell--what was the point of even staying, without Emberheart by his side?

But then Blazepaw dropped down next to him, once again brushing against his side. The others were already drawing ahead, with Carppaw and Frondpaw chittering like starlings. "Come on, let's catch up," Blazepaw muttered in his ear, quickening his step. Rowanpaw forced himself to follow, but as his brother got in line with the other two apprentices, he slowed so he was still a little behind.

"Do you think Leafpelt and Dustfang will let us work as a team? Maybe we can do a mock battle or something! Or pretend we're fighting foxes?" Frondpaw was saying, flicking her tail through the musty air.

"I can't wait to fight a fox! I'll send it running away with its tail between its legs!" Carppaw boasted.

"Have you ever fought a fox, Carppaw?" Rowanpaw growled. The tom turned in surprise, gaze darkening. "Because I have. I've fought them *twice.* And it's not fun. They tear and they snap and you'll be lucky if you get out alive. You should hope you *never* have to fight one, because I know they'll tear you apart."

Carppaw lowered his gaze, glancing at his sister briefly before racing ahead. He slipped in beside the warriors, and Leafpelt looked at him worriedly. Hazelfur glanced at him, then slowed until she was walking next to Rowanpaw. "You should try to be nicer. You'll spend the rest of your life with Carppaw, training and patrolling and hunting. You don't want him to hate you."

"I don't care if he likes me or not," Rowanpaw growled. "I just want this over with." He quickened his step in an attempt to get away from her, drawing closer to Blazepaw. His brother looked hesitant but moved slightly to let him close to his side, between himself and Frondpaw. But as he got close, the she-cat sent him a crossed look and moved faster to get to Carppaw.

He knew it should've bothered him, but he realized quite quickly that he truly didn't care. Frondpaw and Carppaw could treat him however they wanted--he really just wanted to get away. He wanted to slip away back to camp, to sit and watch Hopekit forever. He hated leaving her, having no idea whether she was alright or not. What if she had died already, and lay dead in camp?

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the thoughts. She was okay, she had been just fine before he left. She had been with Flintkit, pressed up against Rainsong's belly. Hungry, but not starving. *She's okay,* Rowanpaw told himself. *She'll be okay. She has you. She'll always have you.*

He barely realized they had reached the end of the marsh, and only looked up when the group slowed to a stop. The soil was wet yet solid under his paws, and he could smell the dirty tang of the pond not far away.

"Gather around," Brownear grumbled, getting into a sit. The other warriors sat beside him, while the apprentices lined up in front of them. Rowanpaw instantly noticed he was on the edge of the group with Blazepaw by his side, while Carppaw, Frondpaw, and Wishpaw sat a little away. Carppaw shot him an uneasy glance, while his sister looked furious.

He scratched the ground with his claws, then looked forward again.

"We're going to teach you to work together today," Leafpelt began, and Frondpaw instantly shivered in excitement, forgetting her earlier anger in an instant.

"The move we'll be showing you works with three cats," Bloomcloud meowed, forcing herself to her paws with a light groan. She looked very skinny, ribs obvious under her dull tortoiseshell and white fur. Her eyes had a strange, weak glow, but she forced herself to stand tall. "We'll show you how it's done first."

"It would be used to fight a bigger opponent," Hazelfur meowed, standing smoothly. "Ideally, a fox or a badger, but a cat, too, if absolutely needed, but remember this is a violent attack. How it works is that the slowest cat, probably the biggest cat, attacks from the front. They slash and growl and snap and takes the complete attention. They are the main attack."

"But also the main distraction," Duskfang growled.

"Exactly." Hazelfur nodded to the tom. "While the cat takes the attention, the other two go in for the attack. One jumps on the back and does as much damage as possible, and the last, the smallest, goes underneath and claws at the stomach. As long as it's not a badger, when it leaves the first cat behind to protect itself, the cat underneath rolls out of the way and drags the legs with it. The attacker will fall, and the cat on its back jumps away then goes back and pins the creature down, along with the first cat. The smallest

cat attacks the face, going for the eyes. Understand?"

Carppaw purred. "Can we try it?"

"You'll watch us do it first," Hazelfur meowed. "Brownear, thank you for volunteering as the fox." The tom huffed in response. "Dustfang, you'll be the diversion, Leafpelt, you'll be the first attacker, and I'll be the small one. Give us some room."

The apprentices followed Bloomcloud back to the edge of the small clearing they were in. Duskfang, Leafpelt, and Hazelfur backed up, beginning to circle Brownear. The tom shook out his fur, licking his jaws, before forcing himself to bristle his fur, square his shoulders, and snarl. His ears flattened and his tail lashed. Duskfang launched forward, swiping skillful blows at Brownear's face with sheathed claws. The brown tom swiped back, avoiding the blows with ducks and dodges.

After a few more moments of the toms exchanging blows, Leafpelt flashed forward and jumped onto Brownear's back. The tom already seemed to struggle to hold up the cat on his back, while she struggled to stay on because she could not dig in her claws. She faked biting his scruff and tearing up his sides, while Hazelfur raced forward, dropped down and slid over the wet grass. She slid under Brownear's stomach and pretended to slice open his belly. The tom turned to snap at Hazelfur, but she rolled away, wrapping her paws around his legs. In an instant, he collapsed. Right before he hit the ground, Leafpelt jumped away then instantly pounced back, holding down his flank. Duskfang joined her, while Hazelfur went to Brownear's face and pretended to slash at his eyes.

Panting, the cats backed away. Brownear struggled to his paws, shaking his fur. "Ouch," he murmured. "I think you hurt my back," he added to Leafpelt. Purring, the fluffy black she-cat curled her body under his chin.

"Maybe you need some rest, old tom," Leafpelt taunted playfully. "Maybe you should ask Dawnstar to make you an elder? You can finally get away from all this training."

"You wish," he muttered back, eyes shining. "I'll become an elder

when *you* do."

Leafpelt's eyes shined. "Never," she purred.

"You two done?" Hazelfur sighed.

Snorting, Leafpelt led Brownear away to the side of the clearing, sitting down against his side. Duskfang watched them with a dark look in his eyes, until Brownear noticed his gaze. "Have something to say?" he growled. Instantly, Duskfang turned his eyes away and headed to the other side of the area, sitting gruffly.

"Bloomcloud, you can act as the fox this time," Hazelfur murmured after a moment. "Carppaw, you attack from the front, Blazepaw you from the side, and Frondpaw from underneath."

The four cats set themselves up quickly, with Bloomcloud looking surprisingly small next to the growing apprentices.

"I promise I won't hurt you," Carppaw said humorously.

Bloomcloud's eyes glowed briefly as she looked at her son. "Give me all you got."

Carppaw let out a huff to brace himself, then began to swipe at his mother's face. She responded, managing to catch him with a soft blow to the ear. He responded by managing to swipe her muzzle. Frondpaw hurried to leap on her back, but overshot and flew over the tortoiseshell. She quickly scrambled to her paws and jumped again, managing to land where she planned, squarely on Bloomcloud's shoulders.

She pretended to rake her claws down her mother's sides, while Blazepaw raced forward, copied Hazelfur's drop perfectly, and stopped directly under Bloomcloud's stomach. He pawed at her fur, and when she backed up and turned her head to snap at Frondpaw, Blazepaw rolled away. He missed Bloomcloud's farthest paw, and instead pulled the closer one. Bloomcloud was unsteadied, but she managed to right herself and shook Frondpaw clear, then smacked softly at Carppaw's muzzle.

"Good try," Hazelfur meowed. "Let's go again."

Rowanpaw shifted as the cats got back into their places. He wanted to join, to try to fight himself. He knew he could do better. But he forced himself to stay where he was, watching as Carppaw swiped at Bloomcloud's muzzle, while Frondpaw quickly went for leaping onto her back. She landed correctly the first time, and not soon after Blazepaw slid under her stomach. When the warrior tried to snap at him, he quickly rolled away, barely managing to grab her paw.

Bloomcloud collapsed, and Frondpaw stumbled away just in time. She turned to hold Bloomcloud down, but she paused quickly when she saw her mother, groaning, coughing, struggling to breathe.

In an instant, all the warriors raced forward. "Bloomcloud!" Hazelfur cried. Carppaw and Frondpaw mewled scaredly, while Blazepaw already started to pace anxiously. Rowanpaw watched coldly as Wishpaw hurried forward. She nosed past Leafpelt, who was sniffing anxiously at Bloomcloud's face.

"Get back! She needs room!" Wishpaw growled, sounding surprisingly commanding. The warriors drew back, and Leafpelt hurried to curl around Frondpaw and Carppaw, murmuring softly into their ears. Quieting her voice, Wishpaw murmured softly to the she-cat, "just breathe, Bloomcloud. Feel the air in your chest, let it fill you."

The she-cat struggled for a few more moments, huffing breathlessly, before managing to her rushing breathing. Finally, her belly filled with air, and she sighed in relief. "Thank you," she murmured.

"No problem," Wishpaw meowed, stepping back softly. Instantly, Carppaw and Frondpaw raced forward, each giving her a lick on the cheek. Blazepaw hurried forward as Bloomcloud struggled to her paws.

"It's alright, little ones," she murmured, touching both her kits on their foreheads. "I'm just a little weak."

"I'm so sorry!" Blazepaw cried, tail flicking fearfully.

Bloomcloud's gaze softened, and she rubbed her cheek against his.

"It's okay, it's not your fault. You did very well." She gazed proudly at Blazepaw. "Just as I always thought you would."

Rowanpaw felt anger grow inside him. Bloomcloud was speaking like she was their mother. And she wasn't. He remembered feeling her warm fur as a kit, pressing against her fluffy white stomach on cold nights, her sweet yet musky smell surrounding him as he fell asleep. But she *wasn't his mother*. No matter how hard she tried.

The only mother I'll ever have is Emberheart.

Chapter Four

Ravenpaw was glad to return back to camp by the time night settled over the territory. The stretching shadows under the trees had scared him, only being out there with Willowpaw. Now, back at camp, he felt much calmer, his back fur clotted with cobwebs. His sister had a similar look, and they went to the medicine cat's den together.

Right as they entered, Mossrain was with them. He grabbed a large pawful of cobwebs from Willowpaw's back then was back at Grayblaze's side. The tom's leg was still bleeding, and instant worry traveled through Ravenpaw.

"Has it slowed down?" he meowed, hurrying to his mentor's side.

"A little. Now with cobwebs, I'll be able to hold it in much better. Put them all over there, please, then check on Brightflower. Use a poultice of goldenrod and dried oak then cover the wound with cobwebs. After that, I want you to do the same to Maskdapple and Frostfall. Goldenpool visited Jaypaw and Flamepaw while you were gone, they should be resting now. And I'll get Silverstrike in a little bit."

Ravenpaw nodded, then led Willowpaw over to the herb storage and removed the cobwebs from her fur. She did the same to him and touched her nose to his cheek before heading off. She nodded to Blossompaw, looking sadly at her sister, then left the den. The white and silver she-cat watched her sister leave sadly, then hardened her gaze and lay her head down.

Ravenpaw grabbed a pile each of dried oak and goldenrod, doing his best to ignore their mixed tang. He dipped his front paws into the water, then headed back to Brightflower. Crouching next to the young she-cat, he spat the paste onto one paw and began to lick the fur around the broken flesh.

Her eye flashed briefly to meet his. "Thanks," she murmured. He

flicked his ear in response, looking at her with a glowing gaze, then continued to clean the wound. Once he knew it was ready, he licked up small amounts of the poultice at a time and licked it into the wound with the tip of his tongue. By the time he was finished it was bleeding slightly, but he quickly went and grabbed enough cobwebs to cover the long scratch down the poor she-cat's side. "Will it scar?" she muttered.

"Probably," Ravenpaw answered softly, licking the residue off his muzzle. "But your fur will grow back and cover it."

"Grow back?" she tried to raise her head up. Ravenpaw pushed her back down softly with a purr.

"You lost some fur around the wound from your attacker. It'll grow back and you'll look just as good as you did before."

Brightflower's eyes glowed for a moment in amusement, then faded. "*We* were the attackers--they were just defending themselves." Her mew was bitter.

"I know," he murmured. "But it's in the past. The only thing that matters now is that you're hurt and I'm here to help. Is your side hurting you?"

"Really bad," Brightflower murmured. "My muscles are on fire."

"Give her two poppy seeds; the first will stop the pain and the second will get her to sleep," Mossrain called over from Silverstrike's nest, where he was treating his injured pad.

"Okay," he answered back, going to the herb storage and shaking two seeds from a poppy head. He licked his pad and stuck them to his paw then limped awkwardly over to the young she-cat, displaying his paw out for her.

"Gross," she murmured with a twinkle in her eye, amusement in her mew. She licked the seeds from his pad then rested her head against the side of the nest, crossing her tongue over her muzzle, whiskers quivering. Ravenpaw watched her for a moment before grabbing herbs and heading to Maskdapple. He took the blood-stained

cobwebs from the back of her neck, checking the teeth wounds dug deep into her skin. He licked away her fur then began to chew the two herbs.

"Ouch!" Silverstrike hissed. Ravenpaw looked over quickly. Mossrain was pulling his paw away from the silver and white tom.

"Accidently scratched him," Mossrain meowed to Ravenpaw, flicking his ears. "It happens."

Ravenpaw looked at him worriedly, then glanced at his paws. He waited a few moments, licking the poultice into Maskdapple's bite wounds. After he grabbed cobwebs and tied them into her fur, he meowed softly, "Mossrain, can I talk to you in the farther den? I really need to tell you something."

Mossrain hesitated, looking at Silverstrike's leg. He quickly wrapped it up then nodded to his apprentice. They headed into the back den, fur brushing at a few different moments. Once they entered the dark, cold cave, they sat facing each other. "What do you need to tell me?" Mossrain meowed, shifting impatiently on his paws.

"Nothing," Ravenpaw answered. "But I have a feeling you need to talk. You're making a lot of mistakes. I know you're a little clumsy but not this much--accidentally making Grayblaze bleed like that, scratching Silverstrike; why would you even have your claws out in the first place?"

Mossrain looked at his paws, stained with blood from healing all day. "I... I'm tired," he muttered.

"I'm tired, too," Ravenpaw said softly, still gazing at his mentor fearfully. "Goldenpool as well. We're not making mistakes. Please, Mossrain, talk to me. I'm worried."

His mentor raised his tormented hazel gaze. "My sister, father, and mother are bleeding out in the cave right next to us--how else should I be acting? I heard what Brightflower said. She obviously regrets the battle, and so does everyone else. It was completely useless, and was caused by our own leader," his mew was shockingly dark, and Ravenpaw shivered. Regret instantly seared

Mossrain's eyes, and he dropped his head. "They are all injured for nothing... Ravenpaw, I have no idea what is going to happen to us. Acornstar is broken and will never lead us properly again and I truly do not know why. She was estranged when I was a kit but not as much as now. Something happened between Redcloud's death--even Appleleaf's--and now that shattered which was already cracked inside of her." He shook his head slowly, sighing. "Everything is falling apart."

"Not everything," Ravenpaw murmured.

"Yes!" Mossrain suddenly snapped. "Everything! Don't even get me started on MothClan--Eagleclaw has been too busy to talk to her about it but MothClan could be here tomorrow and there's nothing we can do about it!" He stood up, lashing his tail angrily.

"No, you're wrong!" Ravenpaw was surprised in his own voice rising. Mossrain seemed surprised, too, turning to look at him with wide eyes. "I talked to Rain, and he doesn't think MothClan will arrive for moons, for seasons. We're safe from them for now, and your family--they'll be okay. They're all strong cats, and they'll heal soon enough."

"And Acornstar?" Mossrain started to pace, seemingly not even registering Ravenpaw's words. "We can't just give her some herbs and get her better."

"How should I know?" Ravenpaw cried, suddenly breaking his calm manner. "I'm just an apprentice! A moon and a half ago I was playing with my littermates in the nursery, curling up against my mother's stomach every night--I don't know anything about anything! I'm just a kit!"

Mossrain stopped, looking at him with a frustrated sadness. "And I'm barely of age! Ravenpaw, you realize this is only my second leaf-bare, right? I was born only the greenleaf before last. And yet I am expected to make all these great decisions for the Clan--all of EchoClan is resting on me and Eagleclaw. And yes Eagleclaw isn't young but she is at heart, and she is still hiding in her mother's shadow despite guiding her for moons."

Ravenpaw looked at him silently as his mentor's gaze turned dark. "Eagleclaw talked to me recently. She had been watching you, as a kit. Same as Goldenpool. They both had already talked about you becoming a medicine cat apprentice, if you asked for it. Eagleclaw told Acornstar to allow you to become one if Goldenpool ever came to ask. Don't you see?" Mossrain stepped closer. "Even when she seemed calm, Acornstar was broken. But it's worse now. And I *don't know why.*" He scratched his claws over the stone.

Feeling weak and scared, Ravenpaw forced himself forward, curling around Mossrain and pressing against his side. "There's nothing we can do about it right now. We just have to wait and see, don't we?"

Once again, Mossrain sighed. "Great StarClan, what is wrong with our Clan?" his mew suddenly sounded broken, and he stared at his paws.

"I don't know," Ravenpaw answered.

Mossrain shook out his fur, forcing himself to harden his gaze. "Well, we're not getting anything done just standing here. I'll finish up the rest of the cats, you get some rest. It's been a long day."

Ravenpaw wished he would've argued to stay and talk more, but he knew his mentor was right. So he followed Mossrain into the other den and collapsed into his den. Almost instantly, he realized his fatigue. His paws ached from working all day, and even his jaw hurt from chewing so many herbs. As he lay in his nest, he realized that his paws were stained with blood, and he began to lick them slowly. The taste was harsh on his tongue, and he stopped after just a few moments. Sighing, he let his eyes flutter closed.

He listened to the sound of Mossrain working, of shifting cats, and the steady breathing of the cats already sleeping. Slowly, calmly, he drifted off.

Ravenpaw didn't dream, but he did register that he was asleep, which was a weird feeling. Everything was black and silent, and he felt more relaxed than ever.

Wake up, a voice whispered softly in his ear, familiar yet strange.

He decided to ignore the voice, despite his better judgment. He was tired and he liked the peacefulness of the deep, neverending blackness of his mind.

Wake up! The voice was sharper this time.

He felt the blackness loosen, and he peeled open his eyes. Everything was still dark, and there was a strange feeling in the den. Shapes rested peacefully in their nests, all except one. It was slim yet muscular, with ruffled, dirty fur that had no color in the darkness. The cat stood over Blossompaw's nest, where his sister was still sleeping, side moving up and down slowly in peaceful sleep.

"You can't destroy my Clan..." the cat spoke quietly. "I will not let them fall to you. I must save them." As his eyes adjusted, Ravenpaw was shocked to see the ginger-brown pelt of Acornstar. What was she doing here, and what was she saying? Suddenly, she raised a paw, and he saw her flashing claws. "You cannot have them!"

"*No!*" Ravenpaw's hoarse, terrified voice cut through the air as Acornstar swiped down. She startled, jumping back before making contact. Eyes flashed throughout the den as cats woke, and Mossrain jumped to his paws in a flash, eyes wide and fur on end.

In the moments the cats were frozen in shock, Acornstar took her chance and fled from the den. In an instant, all his tiredness forgotten, Ravenpaw was after her, though he didn't know what he would do if he actually got to her. It didn't matter, for the moment he left the den he was surrounded by white. Snow rushed down, attacking his fur and filling his ears. It swirled through the dark air and obstructed his vision.

He heard the cat on guard yowl in surprise as Acornstar rushed past them to get into the forest, but he could only see shapes. After a moment, the cat appeared, revealing Boulderclaw. "What's going on?" he called through the loud, rushing air. Mossrain appeared a moment later, repeating the question himself.

"Acornstar tried to kill Blossompaw!" he cried. "I saw her and she ran out of camp."

In an instant, Boulderclaw was trying to push into the den, but Mossrain kept him back. "She's fine! Get back to the entrance, and let me know when Acornstar comes back! She won't be out there for long in this storm." Forcing himself to nod, Boulderclaw started to fight his way back to his original place, but Mossrain added loudly after him, "keep this to yourself for now! We'll go talk to Eagleclaw!"

Boulderclaw looked back, hesitating, then nodded again and went back to the entrance. Mossrain flicked his tail to Ravenpaw and they made their way to the leader's den, the storm blistering their pelts. The stepping stones over the pond were slick with sleet, and the waterfall, the stream blistering mist in the wind, sprayed their pelts with a heavy mist.

Mossrain was in front of him, moving hurriedly, claws scratching through the snow. Without warning, the gray tom's paws slipped out from the stones, and he fell into the water, splashing water everywhere. Freezing droplets touched Ravenpaw's fur, melding with that of the snow forming a steady white layer on his back. "Are you okay?" he asked worriedly, peering into the dark water.

Mossrain stood silently, his short fur flat and dripping. "I'm fine. Come on." He shook his fur, despite still standing belly-deep in the pool. He dragged himself out, shaking his pelt again before padding deeper into the den. Ravenpaw continued over the stones, going carefully until he reached the cave.

Already, Eagleclaw was rising herself out of her nest. She hadn't been sleeping in the den for long, but since Acornstar really started to go downhill, her daughter had been trying to keep a closer eye on her. Obviously, it had not worked too well. "What's going on?" she asked tiredly, then her eyes flickered to her mother's nest, and alarm let her gaze. "Where is she?"

"Gone, out of camp," Mossrain sighed, padding forward and shaking out his coat.

Stumbling on her paws, Eagleclaw hurried to the entrance of the den, looking fearfully out into the snowstorm. "Why? What happened?" She whipped her gaze back to the two toms. "Why did

she leave?"

"She..." Mossrain suddenly lost his cold demeanor from outside and raised a weak, scared gaze. "She tried to kill Blossompaw."

For a moment, Eagleclaw was frozen in shock. After a few moments, she shook out her fur, letting out a shaking breath. "Why? How?" She seemed surprisingly calm, though her ears were flat and her eyes were hard, gazing downward.

"I heard a voice in my head, when I was sleeping," Ravenpaw explained softly. "It told me to wake up. And when I did, I saw Acornstar standing over Blossompaw's nest. She was muttering something, about Blossompaw destroying the Clan, and that she couldn't let that happen. I... I cried out, and she ran. She left camp, and so we came here."

"We told Boulderclaw, who was on guard, not to mention it yet," Mossrain added.

Eagleclaw was silent for a few moments, then she whispered, "did she say Blossompaw's name?"

"What?" Both Mossrain and Ravenpaw voiced their confusion, looking at each other briefly before turning back to their deputy.

"When she was standing over Blossompaw, what *exactly* did she say?" Eagleclaw stepped closer to Ravenpaw, her gaze hard and unreadable.

Ravenpaw swallowed fearfully. "Uh, she said that Blossompaw, or, well, she said 'you'. Like 'you can't destroy my Clan', I think. That they wouldn't fall to her, and that she had to save us. She said 'you cannot have them'. She never mentioned Blossompaw. I... I thought she was talking to Blossompaw, but... Now that I think about it, it seemed so much more personal, like she was talking to a different cat. One she knew." He looked up, feeling so lost and confused. "Is Acornstar truly insane?"

"I don't think so," Eagleclaw whispered. She turned away and began to pace, tail lashing. "I remember, moons and moons ago, when I

was still a young warrior far from deputyship. It was after she lost her litter, right after she lost Redcloud..." Eagleclaw's voice broke slightly, but she forced it away with a shake of her head. "I was broken, too. I tried visiting her, but she was ignoring everything. She was talking to herself, whispering about a cat who had destroyed her life, and was taking everything from her. That they were destroying her Clan, and that she couldn't let her have them."

"That's just like what she told Blossompaw," Ravenpaw whispered. "I don't understand... It truly seems like she's talking to someone else. Like she wasn't seeing Blossompaw at all."

"Perhaps she wasn't," Mossrain whispered.

They stood silently after that, listening to the quiet, rushing storm outside, wondering when Acornstar would enter the camp again, and what she would say for herself. Maybe, finally, they would get some answers.

Great StarClan I love this story. It's, quite honestly, my pride and joy. I get to put everything into it, to push my emotions into these cats. They feel real to me, which is odd to say since they *are* just words on a computer screen. But also, Ravenpaw is based on my own cat, Jinx. But even Mossrain, and Eagleclaw, and Jaypaw and every other cat (Except Boulderclaw, as he is entirely based on my other cat, Sasha) just feels real. They have their own emotions, their own lives--they are alive. More alive than me, sometimes. I'm just watching their lives. This is weird to say. I hope you like the story.

Question #1: What do you think will happen when Acornstar returns?

Question #2: Why do you think Acornstar is like this? Do you think it is a recent pain, or old ones finally piling over?

Chapter Five

Rowanpaw watched from in a tree, claws digging into the bark of the branch he clutched to, looking downward at the small brown form desperately climbing higher and higher, closer and closer to him. Then, just as he always remembered, one of her back paws slipped from the wood. But what he never saw the sudden fear in her eyes, the fearful yellow glow turn to absolute horror. Her second paw slipped, and her gaze found his.

"Help me," she whispered, her mew tiny and scared. "Don't let me die, Rowanpaw. Don't fail me."

Her front claws unhooked from the trunk, and she fell. He reached desperately, but she was far from his grasp. Sparkkit twisted in air, her claws flashing in fear, and then she slammed into the ground.

"Why didn't you save her?" a voice whispered from above him. It was an achingly familiar voice, one that burned each piece of his broken heart. He slowly looked up, feeling completely empty as he looked into that wonderful yellow gaze, with that brilliant ginger fur. Emberheart looked at him sadly. "Why didn't you save me*?"*

"I couldn't," he murmured quietly, hating the sound of his own mew. "I wanted to... I'm sorry."

"'Sorry' doesn't bring us back," Sparkkit responded, walking smoothly along the branch Emberheart sat on. Both their gazes watched him, burning into his messy fur.

"You let us die," Emberheart meowed, shaking her head softly in disbelief. "You could have saved us, but you let us die."

"Why did you let me climb the tree?" Sparkkit asked, looking so small and weak, her ribs still evident under that thin form. "Why did you bring me out in the first place? It was all your idea; making me leave the camp, when we knew there was going to be a storm. Did you want me to

die, did you want me to suffer?"

"No! Never!" he cried, his claws hurting from how much he curled them into the pine tree under him. He felt like he was swaying, his mind dark and empty.

"Why didn't you hunt more?" Emberheart asked softly. "If you had caught even one more mouse, Heronclaw could've gotten something to eat. I would still be alive, and I could watch my kit grow."

"We'll see her soon, won't we?" Heronclaw walked close to her, white pelt dull. He looked like skin pulled tight over bones, eyes bulging from his thin, starved face. "Hopekit will die just like I did."

"I won't let her," Rowanpaw promised weakly.

"Blazepaw will come, too," Emberheart murmured. "He'll starve and you'll watch the life fade from his body."

"Everybody will die," Sparkkit murmured. "Soon, you'll be the only cat left."

"Completely useless," Emberheart murmured, turning her cold gaze to the cat she had once considered family. "You can't save anyone--not even yourself."

"Poor you," Sparkkit hissed. Rowanpaw jumped, pressing against the trunk of the pine tree. His best friend had appeared right beside him, barely a whisker length away. She looked so small, so starved, her eyes narrowed with hate. "You're such a failure. Just like your mother." She launched toward him. Her claws dug into his fur, tearing into his flesh as she pushed him from the branch.

He felt the lightness of himself, twisting through the air. He caught a brief glimpse of the ground before turning and seeing the two cats he loved most in the world. And suddenly, he was slamming in the earth.

Rowanpaw leaped awake, scrabbling in his tough, uncomfortable nest. His claws flashed through the dry bracken, breathing harsh and quick.

"Hey!" In an instant, Blazepaw was in front of him. "Hey, just calm

down. You're okay, it's okay. You're safe." He put a paw on Rowanpaw's shoulder, holding him still. "Just breathe--everything's alright."

The claws on his chest began to loosen, and he did his best to slow his breathing, focusing on his brother's face to calm himself. "I'm fine," he finally murmured.

Blazepaw didn't look convinced and pressed his muzzle against Rowanpaw's cheek. "I'm here. And I'm not going to leave you."

Rowanpaw took a deep breath of his brother's scent, then let out a long, slow breath. "I'm fine," he said again, though he knew it was more truthful this time. "What time is it?"

"Early, just a little after sunrise," Blazepaw answered. "The snowstorm last night was awful. Blew a lot of snow into camp, made it pretty cold. Hopefully all the kits are okay, being in a cave probably isn't helping. Stone can become so cold."

Rowanpaw nodded. Though his nest kept him slightly warm, the side of his body that was facing upward was traced with a chill. He fluffed his fur and forced himself to a sit, shivering as he did so. "Maybe some prey died in the storm," Rowanpaw murmured, beginning to lick down his dirty fur.

"That's why I woke you," Blazepaw explained. "Hazelfur and Bloomcloud are going to bring us out to hunt through the snow for dead prey. Maybe we'll find something living, but I doubt it. Carppaw and Frondpaw are on a hunting patrol with their mentors, though, so maybe there might be something from them when they get back."

Rowanpaw tiredly checked the den to confirm that, yes, the two littermates who they grew up with were gone. The log den was empty except for the two brothers. "Where's Wishpaw?" He didn't actually care about the answer that much, but he liked talking to Blazepaw.

His brother shrugged. "I don't know. She wasn't here when I woke up, so maybe Brownear took her out to train."

Rowanpaw snorted. "Yeah, sure, and hedgehogs fly." He finished cleaning himself and stood up, giving one last shake of his pelt before following his brother from the den, shivering when the cold stone touched his pads. He looked to the camp entrance and saw that Blazepaw had been truthful--the snowstorm last night had flooded the entrance to the camp with a thick layer of snow over the rocks, though there were pawprints leading up to the cave entrance that showed patrols had already left for the day, most likely the dawn patrol and Leafpelt and Duskfang with Carppaw and Frondpaw in tow.

Hazelfur and Bloomcloud were waiting for them, and stood when they got close. "We'll head toward the Gathering hollow and scan most, if not all, the territory in that direction. Hopefully, we'll find something living or dead. Keep your noses ready, the snow will hide a lot of the scents," Hazelfur told them.

Blazepaw nodded excitedly, and with a flick of her tail Hazelfur led the patrol off. Bloomcloud limped slightly as she went after the younger warrior, her eyes glazed. Blazepaw looked at her with a worried gaze and pressed against her side. Bloomcloud gave a very soft purr and nuzzled his head, but she didn't move away. Instead, she actually seemed to lean on him slightly as they went up the rocky pathway.

"Hey, wait!"

The group paused and looked back as Brownear trotted over from the leader's den. "Where's Wishpaw? She wasn't in the log." He looked grumpy, and Rowanpaw guessed he had been reprimanded by Dawnstar for how he treated Wishpaw. But Rowanpaw knew his training was right--he had to be harsh with her, or she would never learn to be a real warrior. She never brought in any prey, and acted more like a medicine cat than anything else. *We don't need another medicine cat--we need more hunters*.

"Haven't seen her," Hazelfur answered. "When did you see her last?"

"Last night," Brownear growled, flicking his tail. "I sent her out for some solo hunting to get her out of my fur."

In an instant, Hazelfur looked worried. "Who was on guard last night?" she asked the tom, hurrying back down the rocks.

"Brackenfoot," Brownear responded. "He's still sleeping in the den. You don't think Wishpaw was mouse-brained enough to stay out all night, do you?"

"That storm came fast," Bloomcloud said weakly. "She could've gotten lost." Worry spiked her mew.

"Brackenfoot!" Hazelfur called to the warriors' den, searching the clearing despite how easy it was to see everything.

The tom emerged after a moment, shaking the sleep from his body. "Something wrong?"

"Did you see Wishpaw when you were on guard?" she called.

The tom shook his head. "No, nor did Hickoryclaw, who was on watch before me. He would've said so if she had come back to camp. Is she missing?"

"She went out late yesterday and no one has seen her since," Hazelfur responded.

"Should we tell Dawnstar to get a search party together?" Bloomcloud asked.

"I'm sure she's hiding in a log or something," Brownear growled. "She'll come back sooner or later."

"It was a dreadful storm, we almost froze in here. I couldn't imagine what it would be like out there overnight." Hazelfur shivered, letting out a breath.

"So, search party?" Brackenfoot meowed.

"No," Hazelfur decided after a moment. "Most cats are already out of camp. Besides, we're going out to search for prey killed by the storm. If she's out there, we'll likely find her."

"Unless she went toward the Old Twolegplace," Bloomcloud

meowed softly.

"She could've," Brackenfoot meowed. "Territory's softer over there, she might've felt more at home. I'll take Birchsplash and Hickoryclaw with me to look over that way. Let me tell Dawnstar."

"What, don't want me with you?" Brownear said coldly.

Brackenfoot flicked his brother's flank with his tail. "I'm sorry, but I doubt she'd want to see you right now. Besides, we still need a guard." He headed off for Dawnstar's den.

"Let's get moving," Hazelfur said, heading back up the rocks and leading her Clanmates out of camp. The marsh ground was hard from the cold night, and it was the nicest thing Rowanpaw had ever felt. The snow was cold and hid his paws, but he wasn't sinking into the mud. He headed rather calmly after his patrol, mouth open in the search for prey, despite being so close to camp.

As they went on, Hazelfur ordered them to spread out in order to cover more ground. They headed straight for the Old Thunderpath, sniffing the snow and air for dead prey and their missing Clanmate. For a while, they found nothing, but as they got closer to the edge of their territory Bloomcloud tripped over something hidden in the snow. She managed to stay on her paws, and nosed through the white powder with her muzzle.

"What's there?" Hazelfur called. After a moment, Bloomcloud raised her head to reveal a snowy thrush, feathers wet and ruffled. The body was stiff, but plump enough for a few cats to get a comfortable stomach.

"That's amazing!" Blazepaw mewed. "It would've been so hard to catch something like that if it were alive."

"It's very good luck," Hazelfur responded to him. "Sometimes, leaf-bare can be a blessing for us, mostly for the snowstorms. Prey can die quite easily in the cold, so we always search for it. It'll freeze quickly, though, and be inedible after a day or two in the snow. That thrush was a good find. Congratulations, Bloomcloud." She nodded to the she-cat.

She dipped her head back, setting the thrush back down on the ground. The snow compressed around it, but it stayed up slightly. Bloomcloud sniffed it closely, then raised her gaze to the trees. "It's a female--it might have young."

"Unlikely in leaf-bare," Hazelfur murmured, "but possible. It wouldn't have gone far from her nest. Might've even fallen from it. Blazepaw, Ratpaw, scan the nearby trees."

The two apprentices headed closer, turning their eyes upward. It was easy to spy through the bare branches, and it didn't take long for Rowanpaw to spot the small nest in the crook of a pine tree. "Found it!" he called, going to the tree and digging his claws into the bark.

"Be careful!" Blazepaw said instantly, rushing over. Rowanpaw looked at him and saw the fear in his eyes, full of memories. He was remembering Sparkkit. His dream rushed back to him, and he remembered the feeling of falling, of twisting helplessly in the air. Unable to help it, Rowanpaw stepped back, swallowing.

Hazelfur came forward, running her tail along his spine. "Don't worry, I'll go check. You two search around to see if any of the young fell out and died."

Angry at himself for being so scared, Rowanpaw turned away and began to search the snow around the bottom of the tree. He passed Blazepaw a few times, and his brother continued to shoot him a sad, worried glance. This was a fear they both shared--heights. It was obvious to Rowanpaw his brother's was worse, but it was evident in both of them.

"Found a hatchling!" Blazepaw called, pulling a tiny, snowy bird from the ground. It had young feathers but was also a little fluffy. It was a small meal, but still something.

There was a scared call from the tree, and the three cats looked up to see two tiny shapes fluttering helplessly into the air. The two young thrushes were struggling to fly away, barely staying up. Hazelfur bunched her muscles from the bird's nest and leaped for one of the hatchlings, catching it in her jaws and managing to catch

a branch from a nearby tree.

The other thrush began to beat its wings rapidly but lost flight after a moment and fell toward the ground with a skrill call. It hit the snow lightly and struggled through the thick powder, flapping one wing desperately, the other stuck under snow. Rowanpaw hurried over and scooped it up with his jaws, cracking its frail neck without breaking the skin.

He had the sudden urge to either eat it swiftly or run away with it, but he forced himself to head back to his Clanmates. Hazelfur reached the ground and nodded her thanks to him, and said through the tiny bird in her jaws, "let's bring these back to camp, then we'll head back out and keep looking for prey and Wishpaw. The queens and kits will eat better than usual."

The cats followed her without complaint, heading back for camp quickly. Hazelfur and Rowanpaw had warm prey, and they wanted to keep it that way. It didn't take long to get back, with the hardest part being the jumps back to the entrance. Bloomcloud almost slipped off the tallest rock, but Blazepaw dropped his thrush and rushed forward, gripping her scruff and pulling her up. She blinked gratefully at him, watching him for a long, proud moment.

Hiding his anger, Rowanpaw hurried into camp. Why was Bloomcloud still pretending? She wasn't their mother, just a warrior they barely knew. Yes, she was acting as Blazepaw's new mentor since Heronclaw died, but the look she gave the young tom was not one of a mentor, it was one of family. And she had *no* right to do that.

When they padded into camp, they instantly noticed Clovertail's dawn patrol with Hawktail and Juniperfur had returned, for the three cats were waiting in the clearing, crouched in the clearing. Clovertail raised herself up, revealing a rat under her stomach. "Is Wishpaw really missing?" she asked as they approached.

"Sadly, yes," Hazelfur answered, setting down her thrush. "We didn't get far before finding these, but we'll head back out there."

Bloomcloud nodded in agreement, setting down her frozen thrush

and settling over it.

"I hope she's alright," Clovertail meowed, then added, "good catches. More than just the nursery will eat tonight. We found two rats and frog while on patrol."

"Bloomcloud found the mother thrush, and Blazepaw that baby. Oh, Blazepaw, set the thrush down and lay on top of it. It'll warm its meat and make it easier to eat." The apprentice nodded and did as he was told. "Two were alive in the nest. I caught one in the air and Ratpaw killed the one that fell to the ground."

"Thank you, StarClan," Clovertail whispered, casting her gaze to the stone ceiling for a moment. "Juniperfur, why don't you take the warm prey to the nursery and spread it evenly between the kits and queens. Bloomcloud, Blazepaw, go ahead and give your prey to me and Hawktail, we'll warm them so we can give them out when they're warm. Then Hazelfur can lead you back out in search for Wishpaw and frozen prey."

Instantly, the cats nodded and did as she said. Juniperfur took the thrushes from Hazelfur and Rowanpaw, while Blazepaw made the point of giving his hatchling to Dawnstar without looking at his father. When Bloomcloud gave over the mother thrush, the four cats headed out again. But they paused almost instantly when they saw three cats entering camp.

Birchsplash came first, eyes dull and fur softly covered in snow, his tail draped low. Hickoryclaw was next, but the black tom instantly turned around and reached back to outside the camp, dragging back a limp ginger body. As he dragged it away from the edge, Brackenfoot leaped up, and together the two toms brought the dead cat into the clearing.

Clovertail stood from the frozen prey without care and approached them softly. Rowanpaw watched emotionlessly as she reached her muzzle low to touch Wishpaw's frosty ginger fur. "Where did you find her?" she asked softly, raising her muzzle from the dead she-cat.

"Near the pond," Hickoryclaw answered hoarsely, eyes filled with

sadness. He had come from the Old Twolegplace with Wishpaw, and had been good friends with the she-cat. "She was under some bracken, probably trying to hide from the cold."

"She didn't deserve to die with an apprentice name," Clovertail murmured.

"No, she didn't." Dawnstar had appeared from her den. She passed the prey without mentioning it, and gave the dead she-cat a soft lick on her messy coat. "She was much too old to have such a name, but her lack of training was against her. StarClan, please, accept her with honor. She could've made a great warrior one day."

Brownear, who had arrived from the warriors' den, looked skeptical, but yet kept quiet. Rowanpaw couldn't help but agree with him. Wishpaw had never truly gotten anything right, except for helping Bloomcloud with her breathing after the training session. But that wouldn't keep her alive forever.

She was a waste of prey. We're better off without her. He stood up and went to the prey Clovertail had left. He crouched down over it, pressing his warm belly against the feathers. It was cold, but he didn't mind the feeling. At least it let him feel something. Once they were soft enough to eat, he could finally go back to the nursery and get to see Hopekit again.

Oh, Rowanpaw, my dear boy.

Question #1: Do you think, with training, Wishpaw could've had a chance to become a good warrior?

Question #2: Do you think it was Brownear's fault Wishpaw died, since he was the one to send her out the day before?

Chapter Six

Ravenpaw was crouched next to the rock pile on a patch of stone cleared of snow, tucked into a skinny mouse. He took his time eating, enjoying the warmth of the blood as it trickled down his throat. He watched with large yellow eyes as Eagleclaw paced restlessly in the clearing, tail lashing in fear. In the moment, she looked more like Acornstar than ever.

The deputy's ears perked and she looked to the camp entrance. Ravenpaw tested the air and found a patrol was returning. There was a light clattering of rocks, and Oakcloud appeared, followed by Pebblepeak, Willowpaw, and Thorntail. At the sight of them, Eagleclaw was racing across the clearing.

"Well? Did you find her?" Her mew was harsh with anxiety, and her ears were flattened in fear.

Oakcloud regretfully shook his head. "We couldn't find her. The snowstorm got rid of any tracks and scents. I don't think she's in the territory anymore."

"She wouldn't just leave! She knows the territory better than anyone, I'm sure she's just..." Eagleclaw's voice broke off, but she forced herself to speak again. "I'm sure she's just calming down."

"She left four nights ago, Eagleclaw." Snowfern limped over the warriors' den, holding one of her back legs in the air. "Maybe she's... gone."

"She still has lives left!" Eagleclaw snapped at the white and black she-cat. "Even if she froze in the storm, she would come back to life and then return to us!"

"I don't think she means that kind of gone," Oakcloud murmured softly to the deputy. "Maybe she..." he trailed off when Eagleclaw looked fiercely at him.

"Maybe she what?" Eagleclaw growled. "Left? You think she abandoned us?"

Oakcloud swallowed awkwardly and lowered his gaze.

Eagleclaw curled her muzzle like she looking at rotting prey. "She. Will. Return." Despite her harsh tone, Ravenpaw knew that the she-cat was more trying to convince herself than anyone else. She was worried, wishing for her mother to return. Even though Acornstar did nothing but cause problems, it was obvious Eagleclaw was still desperate to keep the estranged she-cat close.

Oakcloud gave a slow nod of acceptance, and the deputy turned around and walked away. She paused before reaching her den, looking at the fresh-kill pile. There was only a few pieces of prey in the cleared-out space, looking small and cold. Ravenpaw looked guilty down at the remains of his mouse, and took every last piece of meat from the bones. He knew, though he never hunted for his Clan, he still needed to eat, and was determined not to waste any prey.

I'll try to hold off for the rest of the day--the injured cats need it more than I do. He would find something tomorrow morning, probably something left over. Already, his stomach was showing disappointment. The mouse had done well to curve his hunger, but only for so long.

"Oakcloud," Eagleclaw said suddenly, "take your patrol out again. Go hunting in the forest, and keep an eye out for Acornstar. Snowfern, you go get that leg seen too, it doesn't look well." Flicking her tail, the deputy walked across the clearing and disappeared into the leader's den.

"Come on," Oakcloud meowed to the patrol. "Let's head out."

Thorntail let out an annoyed growl but followed the others as they left again. They were obviously tired, but they were in the best shape health-wise and were desperately needed to take care of their Clan. Getting to his paws, Ravenpaw shook out his fur and headed across the snowing clearing. He sniffed his mother's back leg, padded by cobwebs, and then her shoulder. The shoulder bite

seemed to be healing well, but there was a harsh, sour smell from her clawed leg.

"I think you might have an infection," he mewed to his mother, worry piercing his heart.

She touched her nose to his cheek. "I figured. I was heading to your den when I heard Eagleclaw."

"It's Mossrain's den, not mine," Ravenpaw told her softly, though his heart soared at the thought. One day, the den *would* be his. *But that would mean Mossrain would be dead.* He hated the thought, and shook it away, instead replacing it with anxiety. He didn't want to lose his mentor, and how could he even remember everything? He couldn't even remember how to treat infections.

Leading his mother to the cave, he padded in and took a deep breath. Herbs and dried blood filled his scent glands, but yet it was strangely calming. Mossrain was cleaning Brightflower's side with soft strokes of his tongue. Grayblaze was sleeping, his leg having finally stopped bleeding. Silverstrike and Maskdapple were awake, sharing a nest and cleaning each other's fur, avoiding the cobweb patches. Frostfall had been allowed to leave the den, but was stuck on guard duty and was not allowed to leave camp. Maskdapple was allowed to leave as well, but she had decided to wait and stay with her family for now.

Mossrain looked over as Ravenpaw and Snowfern came in. "What seems to be the problem?" he asked, grabbing some cobwebs and softly covering Brightflower's wound to be worked on later.

"I think Snowfern's leg is infected," Ravenpaw explained, leading the black and white she-cat to a nest. She lay down and painfully stretched her leg over the edge of the moss. Unwrapping the cobwebs revealed three swollen claw marks, leaking puss and surrounded by red skin. Ravenpaw couldn't help but curl his muzzle at the bitter smell, and tried to hide his gag.

"Definitely an infection," Mossrain sighed. "A bad one--it came quick, too. I just checked this two days ago. I thought it was doing fine. Ravenpaw, what do you think we use for infections?"

Ravenpaw hesitated. He knew there was more than one way to help cure it, but they slipped from his mind. "Chervil root?" he finally asked.

"Burdock root," Mossrain corrected. "Chervil root is for bellyaches, but I understand the mistake. They are both roots, after all. I actually got them mixed up once as an apprentice, but the opposite way. Shadefur came in with a really bad bellyache, and since Goldenpool was gathering herbs, I decided to treat him myself. I swore up and down it was burdock root. I was lucky it didn't do anything to hurt him." As he spoke he went to the herb storage, grabbed a few of the roots, then brought them back to Snowfern. He chewed the tough roots determinedly with a shine in his eyes. He always got that look when he spoke of Shadefur.

They must be such close friends, Ravenpaw thought. He knew his own closest friend--that wasn't a littermate or his mentor--would probably be Featherpaw. He was saddened when he remembered how upset she had been of recent. After all, she had only just lost her mother, so why shouldn't she be so broken? He just wished he had the time to help her, but Mossrain kept him pretty busy, and whenever he was free she was busying herself with apprentice duties to distract herself. He prayed to StarClan that she would soon get that beautiful gleam of happiness back in her eyes.

Mossrain stood up and dipped one paw in the water then limped back over to them, spitting the chewed root onto his dry pad. "Alright. Remember, with infections, never lick the wound. Instead, you have to make sure to use your paw. It's harder but necessary." He touched his other, freshly cleaned pad to the poultice, taking a small bit of the mush to spread into the smelly wound. Ravenpaw did his best not to curl his muzzle, though fear pierced his heart and he visibly flinched when his mother winced.

"It just stings," the she-cat murmured softly to her son. He nodded, knowing that was the truth, but he still hated that it hurt her. Carefully, Mossrain continued to take small bits of the chewed root to dab onto the wound, letting it sink into the broken flesh. When he finally ran out, he made sure to gently rub the poultice deeper into the flesh, then licked his paw clean before padding over to grab a pile of cobwebs.

He brought them back and carefully surrounded the wounded leg, patting the webs together. "It should be good for now, but you *must* be careful with it, lest it gets worse. Understood?"

"Understood." Snowfern forced herself to her paws, groaning in pain.

Mossrain sighed and rolled his eyes. "Snowfern, get back in the nest. Your leg needs rest."

"And the Clan needs prey," she responded instantly, still struggling to stand up. She tested her injured leg on the ground and curled her face in pain. Raising it up, she tried to get out of the nest but tripped slightly over the side, stumbling forward. In an instant, Mossrain was pressed against her side, while Ravenpaw stood and lashed his tail in fear.

"You really think you can hunt like this?" Mossrain asked her, sounding a little harsh.

Snowfern let out a stiff huff, her tail flicking swiftly. "I could at least guard the camp so someone else can go hunt."

"Snowfern, that's a very bad idea. The cold could be dangerous."

"Tell that to every other cat in the Clan," Snowfern meowed. "They're all injured, but yet many of them are still patrolling."

Mossrain let out an annoyed sigh. "None of *them* have infected wounds. So sit back down."

With a defeated sigh, Snowfern went back to the nest and lay down, letting out a grateful breath as she curled deeper into the moss. Ravenpaw sat next to her, giving her shoulder a soft lick like she used to do to him. She purred, letting out another soft breath. She rested her head on the side of the nest, looking to where Blossompaw lay across the den, sleeping soundly.

"How is she doing?" Snowfern asked softly.

"Good. Mossrain has her on exercises to stretch out her muscles, but doesn't let her leave the nest much. She sleeps a lot, though. More

than normal, even more than she used to. She's stopped complaining, too, despite Mossrain's orders."

"I'm glad," Snowfern meowed quietly. She was quiet for a moment, and Ravenpaw crouched against her back, beginning to clean her neck. She purred softly, rolling onto her back so her stomach was up. He pulled his tongue back as she did so, looking at her beautiful icy blue-green gaze, glowing with love. "Do you remember your first time out of the nursery?" Snowfern asked softly.

Ravenpaw shook his head.

Snowfern's eyes glowed even stronger. "You were all pretty young, so I'm not surprised. You four were only a moon old but so excited--you were all pulling me everywhere. Willowpaw wanted to stay in the nest, Jaypaw wanted to play with a ball of moss, Blossompaw wanted to try climbing the walls of the den, and you just wanted to see the clearing." She let out another strong purr. "You were all so excited to get out--except Willowpaw, she was scared. But the moment you all got out into the sun, she was just so happy."

"Did Boulderclaw come to watch?"

A brief flash of something filled Snowfern's eyes, but she pushed it away. "Yes, he did. Stonecoat and Shadefur were there, too. You were all having such a good time. Blossompaw and Jaypaw were playing toss the moss-ball and using almost the entire clearing, getting under everyone's paws. Stonecoat was trying to teach Willowpaw to stalk, while Shadefur stayed next to me."

"And me and Boulderclaw?" Ravenpaw was happy to hear about something he couldn't remember. He tried to picture the scene, and though it was rather easy, he wished he could remember it better. It wouldn't have been that long ago, but so much had happened. The easy days had been whisked from his mind like a tail flicking away dust.

"Boulderclaw was trying to stop you from leaving camp," Snowfern purred, her eyes full of happiness and memories. "You just wanted to see the territory. Boulderclaw had to continue to grab you from the pathway. First you tried for the moor, but when Boulderclaw

tried to bring you to the elders' den you saw the forest and almost escaped from him. You were lucky he managed to catch you before you fell! The pathway was much too steep for you, but you didn't care, you just wanted to explore."

"Was I really that crazy?" He didn't remember ever being as uncontrollable as his mother was making him sound like. His littermates had been behaving like normal kits, yet he was being a nuisance!

"Oh, you were perfect." Snowfern nuzzled him, her muzzle soft against his, her breath sweet and warm. "Adventurous, but perfect. You got calmer over the moons, though. I think a bit of it was your visit to the medicine cat's den, just a few days after you first went out into camp."

"I went to the medicine den? Was I hurt?" He felt tingling fear in his claws.

"No, you were perfectly healthy," Snowfern calmed him with simple words, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "Shadefur and Stonecoat were hanging out with you four while I went out into the forest with Boulderclaw for a little break. Shadefur wanted to visit Mossrain and you decided to go with him. Shadefur says the look on your face was so obvious--he told me that in that moment, he knew you wanted to be a medicine cat. Every time Mossrain--well, Mosspaw back then--came to the nursery, you just bombarded him with questions."

"He was an apprentice when I was a kit?" Ravenpaw asked, surprised. Had Mossrain really been a full medicine cat for such a short amount of time? He knew so much!

"He was very close to getting his name, just a moon later. Remember, medicine cats train longer than warriors. Your littermates will get their names before you do, but we'll celebrate yours just the same."

Ravenpaw shivered as his mother touched her muzzle to his cheek, rubbing against him. She calmed him, but anxiety still fluttered in his stomach. "I don't think I'll ever be ready."

"You know more about herbs already than almost all your Clanmates will ever learn," Snowfern murmured. "Ravenpaw, I've known for moons that you would be a great medicine cat--you just need to believe in yourself first."

Her gaze, so calm and loving, warmed his chest. He purred softly, lowering his head to rest against her. She copied his purr, giving his dark-furred head a loving lick before going still. They lay there for a few moments, feeling each other's breathing, calming each other just by the other's presence.

"Ravenpaw! Sorry to interrupt, but I need some help!" Mossrain called. The apprentice flicked open his eyes and instantly found himself staring into Blossompaw's cold green gaze from across the den. Her fur was bristling slightly, and she looked furious. Swallowing, Ravenpaw got up on weak legs and padded to Mossrain, trying to shake his fur to ruffle his flattened, messy coat.

"What do you need?" he asked softly. His mentor was cleaning Maskdapple's shoulder, which had deep, ugly clawmarks breaking the skin.

"See this inflammation?" Mossrain meowed, pointing with one claw to one of the scratches, where the skin was very slightly swollen, glowing red. "It's the very beginning of a possible infection. Grab me horsetail and dock."

Nodding, Ravenpaw hurried to the storage, looking through the herb piles. He took a few stems of horsetail from a small pile, but had to take the rest of the dock. He brought them to Mossrain and set them down next to him. "This is the last of the dock," the apprentice explained.

Mossrain looked at the leaves, pushing a few of the dead or dried pieces away. "We'll gather more--hopefully the frost hasn't destroyed it all. The forest usually protects them rather well." He took the herbs in his mouth, chewed them thoroughly, then carefully spread them over the wound with his tongue. "Since the infection hasn't set, it's okay to lick the herbs in," Mossrain explained.

"Okay. What are both the herbs used for?" he asked, watching closely as Maskdapple sighed in relief, resting her head on the side of her nest. The muscles in her shoulders relaxed, revealing she had been tensing herself in pain.

"The dock was to soothe her wound," Mossrain meowed through his licks. "It cooled down the heat, while the horsetail is calming the infection before it settles. Both of them together really works well to help with wounds before the infection gets too far, as it did with Snowfern's. Once it reaches that point, burdock root or chervil leaves are best. Marigold can work instead of horsetail, maybe even a little better, but we want to save that since it can last. Our horsetail won't last for that much longer."

"Okay," Ravenpaw mewed, wrapping his tail around his paws.

"Ravenpaw?" Mossrain murmured softly.

"Yes?" He looked attentively at his mentor, but the tom kept his gaze to the wound in front of him.

"When did you think I might be a good fit for being your apprentice?"

"I knew the moment you first entered this den with Shadefur that one day you would be a great medicine cat."

"Really?" A warm feeling filled him at his mentor's words. "When I first asked you, I thought you seemed surprised."

"I was surprised you asked," Mossrain responded. "I never knew if you would ever be able to become a medicine cat, since there was already two of us, so I didn't want to disappoint you. I had hoped, throughout the moons, you wouldn't want to become one anymore. I loved visiting you, but a part of me hoped if you saw me always in camp, you'd get more interested in being a warrior."

"Never," Ravenpaw responded. "I love the forest, but I could never be a warrior. I'm sorry I don't remember you visiting all that often. I remember sometimes, but not the first time with Shadefur. I always wondered why we got so close so quickly."

"Well, that's mostly because you're easy to befriend," Mossrain meowed kindly, flicking the younger tom's flank. "But yes, we had already known each other by the time you became my apprentice."

"I always felt I knew you really well," Ravenpaw continued. "I'm sorry I don't remember."

"It's to be expected," Mossrain answered calmly. "You were young, still developing. I don't remember anything from when I was that young, either."

Before Ravenpaw could answer, he heard pawsteps at the den entrance and looked over to see Boulderclaw entering. He still had cobwebs on one of his flanks, but they looked clean. Snowfern looked up at his appearance, and Ravenpaw was surprised to see a dark look in her gaze. "Grayblaze is sleeping," she hissed coldly. "Come back later." She dropped her head back down, her tail lashing.

Boulderclaw padded over to her softly. "I heard you came in here. I just wanted to make sure nothing was wrong."

Her muzzle curled. "Why? Want to make sure I don't do anything to Grayblaze?"

Boulderclaw moved his head back in surprise. "What? No! I wanted to make sure you were okay." He tried to move forward to nuzzle her, but her fierce gaze made him stop. "What's wrong?" he murmured. "You haven't talked to me for days. I figured you were just worried for Jaypaw--why are you acting like this?"

A growl rose in her chest. Ravenpaw felt himself shrinking closer to Mossrain, who curled a comforting tail around his side. "You *left* Jaypaw after the battle! You promised you wouldn't but you left him alone to help out Grayblaze!"

Disbelief rose in Boulderclaw's gaze. "He was more injured! He had collapsed and needed my help! Did you expect me to leave my own brother?"

"Did you not notice how nobody else didn't want to help him?

Maybe there's a reason for that!" Her tail lashed again, the thin fur on her shoulders bristling in fury.

"Enough!" Mossrain finally snapped. "If you want to fight, do it somewhere else! Preferably *not* in front of your kits!"

Regret punctured both cats' gazes, and Snowfern looked down at her nest. Boulderclaw looked at her with a sad expression and murmured, "I can't lose anybody else, Snowfern. Not Grayblaze, not Jaypaw--not you. I wouldn't be able to handle it." On heavy paws with his tail trailing behind him, the large tom turned and left the den.

For a few moments, Snowfern lay in her nest, flexing her claws. Then she suddenly stood. Mossrain didn't say anything and watched her limp out of the den after her mate. Then he rested his muzzle on his apprentice's head. "Every cat fights with those they care about. If they don't, there is no way to show that they truly care. The anger will pass and their love with be stronger than ever, I promise."

I meant to upload this yesterday but I forgot! Hope you enjoy!

Chapter Seven

By the next sunrise, Eagleclaw had broken down mentally. Instead of just waiting in the clearing for the search patrol she occasionally sent out to return, she had one out constantly and waited impatiently in the clearing, pacing back and forth. The moment the tired warriors returned, a new patrol was sent out. It was obvious she wanted to leave camp herself, but Goldenpool and Mossrain had forbidden it. After all, they had no leader. If anything were to happen to Eagleclaw, they would be without guidance.

Even now, Goldenpool sat in the snowy clearing, watching the she-cat from the entrance of the nursery. There was currently no guard on the camp, for every able warrior was either taking a quick nap because they were too tired to patrol or out in the territory. Shaking out his coat, Ravenpaw continued through the clearing, nodding to Goldenpool as he slipped past her into the nursery.

Stormkit and Heatherkit were currently chasing Dustkit and Maple through the den, stumbling over nests and mewling in excitement. The moment they noticed him, each kit turned on their paws and crowded around him. Little paws pummeled his side as Stormkit leaned up and pressed on his shoulder.

"What are those?" she asked, sniffing the leaves in his jaws.

"I don't think he can answer, little one." He looked over at Dappletail with a grateful gleam in his eyes. Mossrain had decided yesterday that the elder should move to the nursery to keep her warm since the elders' den was already drafty and there was nobody else to warm her. She was also very old, so the danger was even higher. After all, she was only a few moons younger than Berrywhisker, and was nearing the possibility of passing away--the threat of whitecough, or even greencough, was too much of a risk, even with catmint in storage.

Ravenpaw brought the herbs in his jaws over to her nest, dropping

them down in front of her. The she-cat sniffed the herbs skeptically, then eyed him coldly. "Mossrain wants you to keep up your strength," Ravenpaw told her.

She rested her head down again. "Save them for someone else."

Ravenpaw sighed, sitting next to her and watching the kits as they continued their play. They were obviously restless inside the small den, but they were too young to be out in the snow for too long. Goldenpool wanted to wait for the sun to rise higher before letting them rush out to freedom.

"Eat the herbs, Dappletail, please." He leaned down and nosed the burnet closer to her muzzle.

She looked at him for a moment, whiskers twitching, then finally licked them up, cleaning her muzzle afterward. Her face curled in disgust, but she forced it back to normal. She sunk deeper into the nest, looking over at the kits. Ravenpaw followed her gaze, feeling calmed by their happiness. If everything was okay for them, why couldn't it be for him? He was still young, and needed to focus on life.

"I should get back," Ravenpaw murmured softly. He stood up, but barely got across the den before the kits realized he was leaving and crowded around him.

"Can't you stay and play?" Maple pleaded. Since he visited so often, the little she-kit had gotten rather close to him, and after learning from Rain that it was Ravenpaw who brought her father back to her, she had become even happier at the sight of him.

"Yeah, can't you be a fox?" Stormkit cried.

"You're the greatest fox ever!" Dustkit agreed.

For a moment, Ravenpaw's heart tugged him two ways. The kits so needed some exercise and fun, but Mossrain was waiting for him to help with the injured cats in the Clan. It was time to check over each injury, and he knew Mossrain was going to task him with that. But their pleading eyes were more than he could handle. He let a

soft growl grow in his throat, eyes shining in happiness as the kits squealed and ran away, tails puffed in excitement.

He followed them slowly, giving them plenty of time to reach the other side of the den. They tucked against the woven bramble wall, quivering with delight. "I'm hungry for kits!" he growled, making his voice deep, but he couldn't hide his amusement and he would never try to stop the joy filling his chest.

"Run!" Stormkit cried, and the four kits suddenly scattered. Dustkit ran along the den wall, Maple darted for Dappletail, Stormkit ran right for Ravenpaw's legs, while Heatherkit hesitated, trying to decide which way to go. Ravenpaw tried to swipe at Stormkit, but he was actually surprised that she managed to avoid his sweeping paw and raced away. He blundered unsteadily for Heatherkit, now acting a little more like a badger than a fox, mostly to allow her to get her head and hurry away. She tried to race after Dustkit, but Ravenpaw leaped after her and softly knocked her to the ground.

"No! Help me!" she cried, scrambling over the soil.

Ravenpaw couldn't stop the purr in his throat. "Haha! Time to eat!" He brought his muzzle down to Heatherkit's side, playfully nibbling her fur.

Paws pummeled his side as Stormkit attacked him, trying to knock him off balance. "Let her go!" she cried. Dustkit joined the attack, mewling and pawing at his shoulder. Maple did her best to climb on his back, and he allowed himself to carefully collapse. Heatherkit scrambled away then jumped on his flank. He realized how big the kits were getting when all four were climbing on him, though they were still quite small and harmless. He fought back very weakly, barely nudging his paws into their sides to unsteady them. After all, they were either balancing on two back paws or standing unsteadily on his fur.

After a little more of playful struggling, he went completely still, and Stormkit let out a yowl of excitement. "Ha! The fox is dead!" she yowled.

"Yay!" With a squeal, Dustkit tackled her. In an instant, Heatherkit

and Maple had joined in. Ravenpaw dragged himself up and watched them for a moment, then nodded goodbye to Dappletail before leaving the den. Cold immediately pressed against his fur, chilling him to the bone. Shivering, he fluffed his short coat and began to hurry across the clearing. But then he noticed a patrol entering camp, consisting of Oakcloud, Petaldust, Shadefur, and Rain.

He was happy to see that Rain held a squirrel in his jaws, with Shadefur and Petaldust right by his side, chattering happily with him while the tom looked a little awkward. Ravenpaw walked up to them, and when his brother noticed him, Shadefur meowed excitedly, "you should've seen Rain hunting! He ran right up a tree to get the squirrel and actually caught it! It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!"

"Yeah!" Petaldust agreed excitedly, tail lashing wildly. "I've never seen someone climb that fast! Are you *sure* you don't have warrior blood, Rain?"

The tom flicked his tail nervously, ears twitching back. Ravenpaw looked at him proudly. "Congratulations, Rain," he meowed. "Why don't we bring that squirrel to the nursery?"

With a grateful gleam in his eyes, Rain followed him toward the den. Ravenpaw waited outside for him to drop off the squirrel. When he appeared after a few moments, the tom meowed, "Dappletail volunteered to separate it."

"Shadefur and Petaldust seem to like you," Ravenpaw meowed, settling with the tom outside the nursery wall. Inside, he could hear the kits squealing in excitement.

"It's odd," Rain commented softly, checking around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear, but the other members of the Clan were on the other side of the clearing or already leaving camp again. Eagleclaw was fiercely asking Oakcloud at the forest entrance if he had seen Acornstar. "I've never had any cat actually like me before, except for Violetfrost and my sister."

"Well, we're allowed to show feelings here; we can be ourselves--

and so can you." Ravenpaw touched his tail to Rain's muscular flank, which was still filling out nicely after having been starved for so long. With leaf-bare coming, he would likely get skinnier again, but never like before. "You don't have to hide your feelings anymore."

"I have to hide where I came from," Rain answered softly.

"But not who you are." Standing, Ravenpaw touched his nose caringly to Rain's cheek then started to pad away. Looking back, he meowed, "let me know if you want to talk--I'll be there."

"Thank you, Ravenpaw," Rain meowed, then turned and disappeared into the nursery. Ravenpaw knew the tom would likely soon go back out on patrol, but he would want to check on Maple first. Padding across the camp, Ravenpaw slipped into the medicine cat's den, seeing Mossrain crouched over Grayblaze's stomach, licking the wound clean.

"Perfect timing! Will you grab me some cobwebs?" Mossrain asked.

"Sure." Padding over to the piles of herbs, Ravenpaw scooped up a pile of the white webs and limped back to his mentor, handing them over to the gray tom. Swiping them carefully, Mossrain held them in his paw while chewing a poultice of marigold and goldenrod. He licked it thoroughly into the wound then covered it with cobwebs. Grayblaze let out a soft growl.

"Is it healed yet?"

"Oh, completely--*that's* why I'm putting herbs on it." Mossrain leaned back and licked the residue of herbs from his muzzle. "Stop worrying. It'll be a few more days."

"What about me?" Silverstrike asked. It looked like he had already been treated, with his ear freshly wrapped and his fur smelling of herbs. His scratched cheek had healed, and he was flicking his tail without pain. His paw was uncovered, but there was still a thin scratch over the pad.

Mossrain padded over, sniffing his injured paw. "This is the wound

that worries me. Walking around will almost definitely infect it. But I think it'll close tomorrow, and you can go on very soft patrols. Stick to moorland border patrols--the soft grass will keep the paw safe." Then the tom went to Brightflower, sniffing the cobwebs plastered to her side. "You should be good to leave tomorrow as well, *maybe* two days. We'll see how the night goes."

"Thank you, Mossrain." Brightflower watched him warmly, a soft purr in her throat. The tom touched his nose to her's then went to the herbs in the corner of the den. Ravenpaw joined him, picking through the herbs to find the best ones. Ravenpaw had noticed Mossrain's mood rising throughout the days, despite Acornstar's disappearance. After all, his family was healing--Maskdapple had even been allowed to leave the den just yesterday, she just had to be careful with her shoulder. Mossrain had told her she wasn't allowed to run, only walk.

"*Excuse* me!" Blossompaw growled from her nest.

"Yes, excuse you," Mossrain answered without looking back.

"I want to know when I can leave!" Her tail lashed.

"I'm sure you do." The gray tom continued to sort his herbs. Ravenpaw looked at him with uncertainty. Noticing his gaze, Mossrain sighed, getting to his paws. He stalked over to Blossompaw, sniffing her spine. "Get up and circle your nest," he ordered.

Struggling to her paws, the white and silver she-cat curled herself around a few times, wincing slightly as her spine curled.

"Keep doing your exercises, we'll test you tomorrow. If you can circle your nest five times without wincing and stretch without collapsing in pain, you'll be fine to leave the den. But you'll only be allowed border patrols, no hunting."

"I can stretch without collapsing in pain!" Blossompaw growled.

"Don't you dare even try!" Mossrain hissed. Blossompaw watched him for a moment, then whipped her head away and attempted to

stretch out her spine. She had barely started to stretch before she suddenly cried in agony and crumbled into her nest. Mossrain spat in anger. "You fox-brained kit! You move again and I'll keep you in that nest for a moon!"

Whipping around, Mossrain lashed his tail in her face and stalked, not for the herbs, but for the den entrance. "I'm going out! Ravenpaw, bring herbs and cobwebs to the entrance of the den, and don't let any cat leave camp unless you've checked their wounds!" Without waiting for an answer Mossrain left the den. Ravenpaw raced after him, emerging into the cold clearing to see his mentor going to where Shadefur and Petaldust were deep in conversation. After talking to the two toms, Mossrain padded off with Shadefur by his side. They headed down the moorland pathway and disappeared from Ravenpaw's view.

With a sigh of defeat, Ravenpaw padded back into the den, going to the herbs and scraping them into desired piles. As he carried some the entrance, his eyes landed on Blossompaw, who was curled in her nest with bristling fur. She looked at him for a moment before turning her head away. For the first time, Ravenpaw felt angered by her presence. Why did she always fight with Mossrain? He hated watching them fight, and looked forward to the day he and Mossrain would be able to have a conversation without her interrupting to ask when she could go free.

He instantly felt guilty for his thoughts but pushed the feelings away as he brought cobwebs to the den entrance and settled into a sit. His tail curled around his paws, watching the clearing. It had emptied out of cats, and he found it was quite boring just sitting there doing nothing. While he was waiting, he cleared the area in front of him of snow, and he was incredibly glad when Jaypaw finally appeared from the apprentices' den, limping unsteadily on three legs.

"Jaypaw!" Ravenpaw called, his tail flicking. His brother's eyes lit up, and he hurried across the clearing, tottering from his wounds.

"What are you doing out here?" Jaypaw asked, touching his nose to his cheek.

"Checking wounds. You can be the first." Ravenpaw let out a purr at his littermate's amused expression, and the tom settled down into the snow

"My stomach has kind've been hurting," Jaypaw meowed, rolling over onto his side to show the cobwebs plastering his thick white belly fur. Ravenpaw peeled them off to reveal the healing claw scratches on his skin. He licked his brother's long fur away from the wound, then chewed up some goldenrod then carefully spread it into the wound. Jaypaw winced, then relaxed with a grateful sigh, sinking into the cold stone under him.

Once he was finished, Ravenpaw secured the herbs with cobwebs then leaned back, spitting out the tangy remains of the poultice. "Let me check your shoulder, too," Ravenpaw meowed, and his brother rolled back over and let him remove the slightly red-tinted webs that covered his shoulder. The deep clawmarks were healing well, but the movement of Jaypaw walking had disrupted the sealing skin. "You need to stop moving your shoulder--moving your muscles is breaking the skin open again."

"Well, that's not fun," Jaypaw commented.

Ravenpaw snorted with amusement. "No, I wouldn't think so." Ravenpaw reapplied some goldenrod and then the cobwebs as well, tying them to his brother's bright fur. "Try to pick somewhere to be and stay there. If you keep disrupting the healing it'll take forever to get back to training."

"Well, I want to get back to it as soon as possible," Jaypaw meowed, getting to his pale gray paws with a slight groan. Then he sat down next to Ravenpaw. "I might as well stay here. It looks like you need the company, anyway."

Ravenpaw tried to hide the overwhelming excitement inside of him. He was happy his brother decided to stay and loved the slight brush his fur against his. "If you want to, it won't be that much fun though. I'm just waiting here for any injured cat to pass by."

Even as he spoke, a patrol consisting of Boulderclaw, Flamepaw, Stonecoat, and Frostfall padded in from the forest entrance. They

held quite a bit of prey in their jaws, and Ravenpaw felt his stomach rumbling. "Boulderclaw?" he called softly, nervous to raise his voice. His father instantly padded over, dropping his mouse on the ground.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"Mossrain told me to check every cats' injuries. Could you ask the patrol to come over here so I can check them? I just... I didn't want to order them over here."

Boulderclaw purred with amusement. "Sure. While I do so, share this mouse with your brother. You deserve it." He touched both cats on their forehead with his nose then padded off to the rest of the patrol.

Ravenpaw leaned down and took a bite of the mouse, shivering at the lovely warm feeling of the meat. Jaypaw took a bite as well, and they took turns sharing the prey until it was gone. While licking the remains off his muzzle, Boulderclaw padded over with the other cats. Ravenpaw decided to check Frostfall first since she was in the worst shape.

"DId Mossrain say you could hunt?" he couldn't help but ask as he looked at the claw marks on her haunches, which were bleeding softly.

"He told me to stay on border patrols, but there's only two a day and the Clan needed fresh-kill. My health was of least importance."

"Not to me." Ravenpaw was surprised by how much he truly meant it--he didn't know Frostfall too well, but he did not want her risking anything. Then he remembered; *she's going to have kits*. Sometimes his visions slipped from mind, but he was still surprised that he had forgotten that, when Stormkit was four moons, Frostfall would be close to kitting. After covering the freshly-coated wound with cobwebs, Ravenpaw told her, "stay in camp until tomorrow, and don't go on any more hunting patrols. You're lucky you didn't break open your scratches."

He checked her neck and back next, finding both the wounds were

healing very nicely. The bite wounds on her neck were actually barely even there anymore, just tiny punctures in her skin. Ravenpaw next checked over Stonecoat, but the claw marks on his haunches were barely even noticeable. "I don't think you need herbs or cobwebs anymore. Just keep it clean and you should be fine." He hoped he was right about his diagnosis.

"Thanks, Ravenpaw," Stonecoat meowed. His mew sounded unnaturally sad. He noticed an empty gleam in his eyes, but before Ravenpaw could ask him what was wrong, Stonecoat got up and padded away.

"He misses Shadefur," Boulderclaw told Ravenpaw softly. "He'll be okay, don't worry."

Ravenpaw managed a nod, checking Boulderclaw's side wound. "I think you're okay, too. Just don't overwork yourself." He decided to lightly cover the scratches with goldenrod but left them without cobwebs. "Don't rub it off," he warned.

"I'll do my best." Boulderclaw rested his muzzle on Ravenpaw's forehead. "You're doing amazingly--I'm incredibly proud of you, little one. I'm proud of you, too, Jaypaw. Just a little while more and you'll be able to get back out there." He padded away softly, heading away for the warriors' den. He was hopefully taking Ravenpaw's advice and was going to rest. But then he suddenly turned away and went to the moorland instead. Ravenpaw said nothing.

Flamepaw settled in front of him in complete silence. Ravenpaw checked his flank and his chest, finding that both the wounds were healing nicely. He covered both with goldenrod and cobwebs, then meowed softly, "are you doing okay, Flamepaw?"

The tom's cold eyes locked onto his, but he said nothing. He stood and stalked away, his tail dragging through the snow without notice. Ravenpaw watched after him sadly, wishing he had an herb to help the tom feel better. He could barely remember what the tom's voice even sounded like.

"Poor Flamepaw," Jaypaw whispered.

"I don't know what I would do if I lost Snowfern," Ravenpaw murmured. How could he ever go on living, knowing his mother would never live again? Even if he could see her in StarClan, it wouldn't be the same. He suddenly realized how careless he had been when Russetdawn died. He had only been sad for the unborn kits who never saw life, he didn't even think of the she-cat or her family. StarClan was not alive--they were ghosts of the past. Russetdawn was dead, and would never have the experience of life again. But yet, despite the fact that she would never live again, she had been calm. Even as her family and her Clan mourned her body, Russetdawn had admitted she was okay with death, and even the death of her kits.

Living is everything, but we have to be ready to die.

Question #1: Who is your favorite character in Ravenpaw's story? What about Rowanpaw's?

Question #2: Is there a character in either story that you would like to know more about, or see have a bigger part?

Chapter Eight

By the time Ravenpaw had checked the last injured cat, the sun had begun to set, with orange starting to darken the endless blue sky. Gathering the scraps of goldenrod--he had used every last bit of cobwebs he had brought out--he carried them into the den. Every cat was sleeping except for Brightflower. The pretty tortoiseshell looked up from cleaning her shoulder. "Welcome back," she meowed softly.

He dropped the goldenrod down at the herb storage. "Thanks," he responded quietly. Luckily, the she-cat's nest wasn't far from where they kept the herbs, so he didn't have much fear about waking the others, who so needed to rest to heal their wounds.

"Do you think Mossrain is okay?" Brightflower shifted closer inside her nest, her ears flicking worriedly.

"I think so," Ravenpaw responded, beginning to separate the herbs before him. "He went out of camp with Shadefur. I'm sure he'll come back calm and collected."

Brightflower purred softly. "I want to be like them someday," the she-cat murmured, leaning back into the moss. "To be that close and happy."

Ravenpaw found himself a little confused. Wasn't her best friend Featherpaw? The two were close in age, so they likely had a lot in common. Surely they were as close as Mossrain and Shadefur would be, since the two toms were just over nine moons apart in age?

"Yeah, me too," Ravenpaw responded finally.

Once again, to his confusion, Brightflower purred in amusement, though soft and quiet. "Don't worry, Ravenpaw, you don't have to worry about that for a long time."

Ravenpaw opened his jaws to ask her what she meant, but then he heard pawsteps and turned to see Mossrain and Shadefur entering the den. Mossrain was in the middle of laughing at something Shadefur had said but quieted when he noticed all the sleeping cats. The two cats padded back to the herb storage. Ravenpaw noticed Shadefur's shoulder, which had a few healing scratches, was uncovered and slightly bleeding.

"What happened?" Ravenpaw asked softly, worried for his older brother.

Mossrain snorted, looking amused. "He decided to climb a tree despite the fact that I told him not to, then broke open his wound." Mossrain grabbed some cobwebs from the dwindling supply and went back to his friend, sitting down and licking the large gray tom's bleeding shoulder.

"You don't have to be so rough," Shadefur muttered, eyes glowing playfully.

"You'll know when I'm being rough," Mossrain responded with a light tone, covering the scratches with a thin layer of cobwebs. "If you break them open again I'll trap you in a nest for the rest of leaf-bare."

Shadefur purred, touching his nose to Mossrain's. "I'm sure you'd enjoy the company." He murmured something in Mossrain's ear, and the smaller gray tom flicked his tail happily in response. Shadefur began to pad away, then eyed Blossompaw sleeping in her nest. He veered off to go to her nest.

"Shadefur--" Mossrain cut off when the gray tom nudged Blossompaw's shoulder with his paw. The small cat blinked open her eyes, looking tired.

"What?" she mumbled.

"You keep treating Mossrain like you are now, and one day you'll find yourself on my bad side. You talk to him with respect or you don't talk to him at all. Understand?" Ravenpaw was surprised by the harshness in Shadefur's meow. How could he speak to his own

sister like that?

He must be really close to Mossrain. Not for the first time, he wished he could that good of friends with somebody.

"Shade--" Blossompaw tried to say, but he stopped her short.

"Do you understand?" he growled.

For a moment, Blossompaw was quiet, staring at him with wide eyes. Then, finally, she murmured, "okay."

"Good," Shadefur hissed. "Stop being such a self-centered kit and try to care about someone else for a change. Maybe if you were nicer, some cat would actually care that you're in this nest." Without another word, Shadefur turned and stalked from the den. As he left, he was forced to weave past Eagleclaw to escape the den.

The deputy stared after him in surprise, then turned to Mossrain. "What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing of importance," the young medicine cat decided quickly, hurrying forward to his deputy. He sniffed the she-cat's shoulder wound, then stepped back. "Why are you here? Is something wrong?"

Her eyes flashed. "Of course there is! If you haven't noticed, my mother is missing!"

Mossrain flicked his tail uneasily. "Sorry, I just meant... Uh, what do you need, Eagleclaw?"

"I want you to go to the Moonstream," the deputy said, taking a deep sniff through her nose, forcing herself to stand taller. "Ask them where Acornstar is--what we should do."

Mossrain swallowed, looking a little awkward. "We'll go," he meowed finally, "but, uh, don't get your hopes up. StarClan does not always tell us everything."

"They will tell us something," Eagleclaw decided. "Go now, and come back with news."

"It will be quite a while before the moon is in the right place," Mossrain quickly explained, but Eagleclaw shook her head in response.

"I don't care. Your Clanmates will be fine--Goldenpool will help them if they need anything. Take Ravenpaw and go." She turned and left the den, her tail tip flicking in anxiety.

Mossrain sighed, then headed for the herb store. He quickly and skillfully stored the herbs then stood and shook out his coat. "Well, let's go. Brightflower, we'll be back soon. If anything happens, please go tell Goldenpool. Don't open your wound, though."

"I won't," the she-cat promised. "Good luck," she added.

"Good luck to you too," Mossrain meowed, touching his nose to her's before flicking his tail for Ravenpaw to follow. Together, the two young toms headed for the den entrance. Ravenpaw found himself nervous as he left the camp, unsure of what StarClan would say. Would they say where Acornstar was, or would they dodge the question? Would they say to just leave her, to have Eagleclaw take over?

"How many lives does Acornstar have left?" Ravenpaw asked quietly as they headed down the rocky pathway.

Mossrain hesitated with his answer, waiting until he touched down on the cold snowy grass. "Six."

"She's only lost three lives? How long has she been leader?" Ravenpaw had always been told she had become leader when she was rather young and had assumed she had been EchoClan's leader for a rather long time, much too long to have only died three times.

"Longer than any other leader right now-- one of the youngest the Clans have had. She became Dovestar's deputy after Chiveclaw's death, and leader only half a moon later after Dovestar had an awful accident."

"She's been leader since Boulderclaw was an apprentice?" Ravenpaw breathed. That was so long ago! And she would've been so young,

too. "And Dovestar's death--it was so quick! How did she even know what she doing?"

"She didn't," Mossrain sighed, continuing through the darkening forest. "At least, that's what Goldenpool said. By then, Buzzardcloud had died and she was young and on her own, so it was hard going. Acornstar wasn't as messed up as she is now, but she was young and confused and of course still definitely not as stable as any cat would've liked."

"So... The Clan's been going downhill ever since Acornstar was made leader?" Ravenpaw murmured, forcing himself to continue on after his mentor.

"It was unfortunate that it happened this way," Mossrain meowed slowly. "If Dovestar had lived longer, perhaps she would've learned to deal with grief. But there was an awful storm one night and a kit had gone missing. Dovestar was leading a patrol to the forest to find it when she fell off the pathway. She broke her spine, her legs--everything but her neck. She was in awful pain, but StarClan was silent. Goldenpool had no idea what to do. Only a few days passed before Dovestar died. It was her last life."

"That must've been awful," Ravenpaw murmured. "It seems leaders in EchoClan have bad luck."

"No kidding," Mossrain muttered.

They fell into a comfortable silence as they continued through the dark forest. After a bird called shrilly from the shadows, Ravenpaw quickened his step to fall side by side with his mentor. Mossrain curled his tail over the young tom's shoulders. It instantly calmed Ravenpaw enough for him to enjoy the beauty of the deepening shadows.

It didn't take long for the forest to end, and together they headed down the low slope of the moorland. SageClan's sharp, wind-blown scent filled Ravenpaw's whiskers, but the darkening snow-covered moor was undisturbed. Everything was sleeping--except for the two EchoClan cats, padding across the stretch of grass with cold pads and fluffed fur.

Ravenpaw was glad to slip into the Star Cave, though the wind did sweep through the many small holes that allowed the moonlight to shine inside. He took a few licks of the thin, freezing river water. Mossrain joined him, then they settled into the sand in wait.

"What do you think StarClan will say?" Ravenpaw finally asked.

"I don't know," Mossrain sighed. "She is the anointed leader of our Clan, blessed with nine lives by StarClan. But she is, in all honestly, breaking our Clan. Eagleclaw would be the best thing to happen to EchoClan for a long time, but if StarClan wills for Acornstar to rule until her final death, then so be it. We follow the will of StarClan."

"Okay, Mossrain." Ravenpaw nodded sadly. He hated the thought so clear in his mind--*Acornstar should not be leader*. Wouldn't it be so much easier if Eagleclaw, wise despite her upbringing, was able to lead them? With nine lives within her, couldn't Eagleclaw make EchoClan so much more powerful? Because that's what they needed. All the Clans needed power, but also peace with each other; because together, with as much power as possible, they may defeat MothClan.

They waited in silence as the moon rose higher and higher into the sky. Ravenpaw felt sleep overcoming him, and struggled to keep his eyes open. His jaws opened into a large yawn, and he struggled to contain it. Mossrain purred, but didn't say anything. Eventually, Ravenpaw rested his chin on his paws, whiskers brushing the soft sand under him.

Trying to stay awake, he let his mind wander back home, wondering how everyone was doing. Did Goldenpool have to leave her kits to check in on the injured cats? What if a wound got infected while they were gone? Flicking his tail, he let out a sigh. There was nothing he could do right now.

Ravenpaw knew he must've slipped in and out of sleep, for time moved strangely. It felt like moons, yet no time at all, when bright moonlight filled the Star Cave, scattering broken moonlight onto the sparkling water, bouncing off the glittering pebbles under the smooth-flowing stream. As always, Ravenpaw watched with awe at the beauty. He let out a soft breath, getting to his paws. Sand stuck

awkwardly to his belly, and he shook it away the best he could.

"Come on," Mossrain murmured, sounding tired. He padded forward to the edge of the water and lay down next to it, lapping softly at the stream. Ravenpaw joined him, and was grateful that he was allowed to finally close his mind to the world and drift off.

He awoke to a quiet forest, the trees full of bright green leaves that rustled in the wind. Ravenpaw looked around, but he couldn't see anything or anyone, nothing except endless trees and undergrowth. "Hello?" he called. "Echo? Berrywhisker? Violetfrost?"

There was no answer.

There was a soft noise behind him, and he looked into the woods, searching for what had moved. For some unknown reason, his eyes traveled to the grass before him, where a large acorn was sitting in the green stalks. Was that what he heard, an acorn falling? He sniffed it but found no strange scent. He rolled it softly with his nose and saw a large and ugly crack down the length of its side.

There was a loud, thunderous cry above him, and he leaped backward in fear. Circling down through a break in the trees was an eagle, white head glowing like snow and yellow eyes large and fierce. Ravenpaw scrambled father away, but the eagle was not focused on him. Instead, it used its huge talons to grip the acorn and began to carry it into the sky.

Ravenpaw watched it slowly circle upward, looking so happy and smooth. Then, suddenly, the acorn slipped from its talons and fell toward the ground. With a screech, the eagle dived after it. Ravenpaw could see its gaze, full of terror and sadness. Right before the acorn hit the grass, the eagle managed to catch it again, crying out with relief. It tried to fly upward again, but it seemed unable to. No matter how hard it beat its wings, it was unable to go upward. The acorn seemed to be holding it down, not allowing it to fly.

It looked downward at its talons, agony in its eyes. With a sad cry, it opened its talons and let the acorn fall through the air and land in the grass next to Ravenpaw. The apprentice stared up at the eagle, watching its slow way upward, looking dragged down with depression. But it was still soaring, still climbing higher and higher.

Ravenpaw thought the dream would end, but then a small black shape burst from the trees, launching itself into the much, much *bigger bird. Ravenpaw realized, with a shock, that the attacking creature was actually a raven. Its jet black feathers were ruffled, and its dark eyes glowed with malice as it pecked wildly at the eagle's face. With a screech, the eagle began to fall.*

Opening its pale beak, the raven let out a loud cry. Then it launched itself up, flying straight up for the bright blue sky, leaving a few feathers to float down after a quickly-falling eagle. Ravenpaw jumped back as the large bird crashed into the grass. Its wide yellow eyes stared at him with no feeling, blank and empty. The poor creature was dead.

It just wanted the acorn*, he thought. He looked back up for the raven, but it had disappeared.*

"Ravenpaw."

The apprentice whipped around, finding himself facing a cat he had never seen before. He was a large, muscular tom, with flaming red tabby fur. His large eyes, a deep and glowing green, were filled with sadness. "Help my family," he murmured.

"Who are you?" Ravenpaw asked fearfully. "Who's your family? Are they in trouble?"

"Help them." He looked at the eagle, sadness in his eyes. "Help my daughter realize the truth."

"Daughter?" Ravenpaw looked over at the eagle, the body resting right next to the broken acorn. "Are they *your family?"*

Ravenpaw woke by the stream with a start. Dull sunlight was shining into the Star Cave, glistening off the Moonstream. Mossrain quietly blinked open his eyes. "That was...strange..." he breathed.

Ravenpaw just nodded, still thinking fiercely. Had the red tom really been referring to the acorn and eagle as his family? He tried to remember if he had heard of a red tom in StarClan. *Red tom, red tom, red tom... Redcloud!* The acorn and eagle represented Acornstar and Eagleclaw! It was so obvious, how had he not seen that before?

Ravenpaw looked at his mentor, beginning to open his mouth to speak, but then he noticed a worried expression on his mentor's face.

"What wrong?" he asked.

"StarClan did not share with me," Mossrain murmured, sitting up with a lost glaze over his eyes. "We are on our own." Then he looked at Ravenpaw with a gleam of hope. "Unless--did they share with you?"

Ravenpaw gave a nervous nod. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"What for?" Mossrain brightened. "StarClan shares with us for a reason. As long as they shared with one of us, I'm fine with it. StarClan sends visions to those who need it the most, not those who *want* it the most. So, what happened?" He hunkered down in front of the apprentice, eyes wide and tail flicking.

Ravenpaw swallowed. Hesitantly, he explained what he had seen, but for an unknown reason, he kept the part about the raven to himself. If the acorn and eagle had meant real cats, then did the raven as well? And wouldn't that mean that he was the cause of Eagleclaw's downfall? *No, surely not?*

After he finished talking about his exchange with Redcloud, Ravenpaw fell silent, looking at the sand under him. Would Mossrain understand the dream? The young gray tom was silent for a few moments, obviously deep in thought. He let out a heavy breath, blinking slowly.

"Acornstar fell, and Eagleclaw was trying to bring her up. Then she lost her but caught her again. Then she let her go willingly and finally managed to fly."

"So the first time was an accident, but the second time on purpose?" Ravenpaw asked.

"Yes, I think so. Eaglestar has just lost Acornstar, so I think she needs to get her again then lose her. Then, she will be able to fly upward."

"Can't we just go home and tell Eagleclaw to let her mother go?" Ravenpaw questioned. It would be easier and would cause fewer problems for their Clan.

"No," Mossrain sighed. "Eagleclaw must learn on her own that her mother cannot be what she once was. We will tell her that StarClan wants us to bring Acornstar home, and once she is, hopefully Eagleclaw can realize the truth. But things will just get worse until Acornstar returns. Eagleclaw would never take over as leader as long as her mother was alive."

Ravenpaw nodded in understanding, but there was still a deep pit of doubt in his stomach. How long would his Clan suffer before there was peace?

Sorry this is late, I was having some writers' block. But it's here, and I'm excited to keep writing! No questions this update, but you can comment your thoughts, predictions, questions, whatever you want! I hope you enjoyed!

Chapter Nine

Mossrain and Ravenpaw left the Star Cave only to emerge into a cold dawn morning, thick snow stretched across the sloping hills. The distant forest of their territory looked bright and covered in a coat of white. They headed silently across the moorland, both deep in thought of the prophecy Ravenpaw had received. Ravenpaw couldn't help but wished he had been able to question Redcloud, to ask him about Acornstar and what was truly wrong with her. Was there anything he could say to help her, once she was returned to camp?

"Ravenpaw." Mossrain stopped suddenly, looking out across the hills. Ravenpaw followed his gaze to see four shapes bounding across the snow-covered grass, tails streaming out behind their slim bodies. The apprentice felt anxiety raising in his stomach, but Mossrain was calm as he turned to face to the approaching warriors.

They slowed as they came closer, their eyes shining with open hostility. The lead cat, a thick-furred light brown she-cat, was lashing her tail. "Mossrain." Her voice sounded accusing, like she was speaking the name of an enemy.

The gray tom dipped his head, swallowing. Ravenpaw noticed that Mossrain was not calm anymore. With the four warriors so close, all looking angry and untrusting, he seemed to sense something was wrong, and his fur was prickling uncomfortably. Ravenpaw could feel his legs weakening, his heart beating so fast he thought it would burst from his chest. "Hello. Briarcloud, right?"

The she-cat did not seem happy that Mossrain knew her name, and turned her head briefly to look at her Clanmates. Ravenpaw noticed a thick patch of cobwebs on her neck, and saw the other members of her patrol had injuries, too. One cat, a dark ginger tom, was leaning to one side of his body, taking weight off a web-wrapped front leg. His eyes were flaming with fury. The she-cat, Briarcloud,

looked back at the EchoClan cats. "Why are you here?" she growled.

"We needed to speak to StarClan, but we are on our way back home now, if you'll let us by." Ravenpaw was impressed with how smooth Mossrain managed to keep his voice. If he, Ravenpaw, had been speaking, he was sure his voice would be quivering with fear and anxiety.

"And why did you need to speak to them?" Hissed the dark ginger tom, lashing his tail.

"Probably asking if they should attack again," muttered the third warrior, a tortoiseshell and white she-cat with guarded green eyes.

"It was nothing of the sort," Mossrain sounded indignant. "EchoClan had its reasons for attacking, but you cannot blame us. Medicine cats stand apart from the fighting. I would've liked there to be no battle at all, for right now I have plenty of cats awaiting my attention. So, if you'll excuse us." Mossrain dipped his head to the cats and tried to turn away, but the dark ginger tabby and the last member, a white and black tom, quickly blocked their way.

"Because of your Clan, my son is fighting for his life," the dark ginger snarled, ears flat and eyes harsh.

"I'm sure Poppysong is doing her best to save him," Mossrain meowed. "Now, please, do not cause yourselves more trouble."

"'More'?" Briarcloud copied angrily, stalking over to stand with the two tom warriors. "Don't forget *your* Clan was the one who invaded *our* territory."

"My Clanmates believed they were provoked," the medicine cat explained calmly. "Please, let us pass. EchoClan is awaiting us and they will not be pleased if we are withheld. *Especially* if we were to be injured."

"Who's speaking of injuries?" the white and black tom growled. "We just want some answers."

"I don't know," the ginger tom hissed, claws flexing in and out. "I would like some payback for my kit."

"We need peace among the Clans," Mossrain murmured, stepping closer to Ravenpaw. The apprentice had barely realized how much he was quivering, his fur on end and his heart racing. He could barely breath, just watching these warriors, filled with rage, surround them with stiff figures and burning eyes.

The tortoiseshell's eyes flashed weakly for a moment, but she kept quiet as her furious Clanmates moved closer to the medicine cats.

"Those who wish for peace do not normally make war," Briarcloud growled.

"Wise words from one so determined to fight," Mossrain answered. "Briarcloud, you do not want this on your conscious. Attacking medicine cats is against the will of StarClan-- border fights are awful but lawful. This is not. Let us pass." Ravenpaw could hear it in his mentor's voice; he was becoming scared and worried.

"Briarcloud, perhaps he's right," the tortoiseshell murmured softly. "I worry for our Clanmates' safety as well, but you cannot endanger the lives of healers or their patients. Revenge comes in battle, not a dangerous attack on those who don't deserve it."

"'Don't deserve it'?" the ginger hissed. "Sorrelfur, you can't tell me we shouldn't be allowed revenge! If medicine cats are so amazing, why couldn't they stop their rat-brained leader from attacking?"

"I would advise you to speak your next words carefully. Acornstar is a Clan leader, chosen by StarClan. You should not disrespect her." Mossrain spoke calmly, while Ravenpaw couldn't help but think, *isn't that exactly what our Clan does?*

The ginger tom snorted scornfully. "Oh, please! A rat could lead better than her any day!"

"Pouncefoot, calm yourself," Sorrelfur said softly. "Let's just let them go on."

"Hush, Sorrelfur!" Briarcloud growled. "If you don't like it, leave! They deserve it." Her scathing gaze turned back to the medicine cats. Sorrelfur huffed in anger, then turned and raced away across

the moorland, bounding over the snow like a fleeing rabbit. "I doubt you could do anything about it anyway. And what's your Clan going to do, start another battle they can't finish?"

"Didn't you hear him?" Pouncefoot scoffed. "He has *so many* patients to return to. I bet his Clan is hanging on by a single claw."

The white and black tom growled in agreement. "Maybe we should attack them, see how they feel. Then EchoClan will finally stop thinking they're better than everyone else!"

"You are just making this worse," Mossrain insisted. "Let us go home in peace, and this can stay in our minds but never be spoken about. Our Clans can finally settle into peace with each other."

Briarcloud showed her teeth. "Our Clans shall fight until the debt is repaid!"

Debt? What debt? Ravenpaw looked to Mossrain for an answer.

"That is ridiculous!" Mossrain lashed his tail, revealing some anger for the first time that day. "We should never forget the past, but we should get over it as well! That was countless moons ago, before any of our elders had even been born! Perhaps before even their parents were born!"

"Sometimes, even time can't heal a wound," Briarcloud growled. "Especially when it's infected. And EchoClan is that infection."

"Maybe its best to cut the infection out," Pouncefoot said darkly, his eyes flashing with a cold gleam.

The taunt hurt more than the SageClan cats would think, since Russetdawn's death was still fresh in their minds. "Is this truly making you feel better?" Mossrain finally murmured.

Briarcloud's eyes flashed briefly with regret, but then she hardened them again. "EchoClan seems to have bad luck with leaders, don't they?" the she-cat taunted. "I wonder how Eagleclaw will mess up in the future?"

Mossrain began to bristle. "EchoClan hates the memory of Brookstar

just as much as SageClan!" he hissed.

Brookstar? Ravenpaw was confused. *What did Brookstar do to SageClan?* He did his best to remember the story of the old EchoClan leader, but he knew that Dappletail had not mentioned anything about SageClan. Pouncefoot noticed his expression.

"Oh, does the little kit not know the history of his own Clan?" he taunted.

"They're probably all too embarrassed," scoffed the white and black tom.

"Wanna know what happened, little kit?" Pouncefoot growled, not waiting for an answer before beginning. "After one of your medicine cats was exiled for *murder*, our Clan was kind enough to send over one of our medicine cats to train another for you. But when poor, sweet Flowerheart eventually got to return home, your twisted, crazy leader killed her. Murdered a sweet medicine cat in cold blood for no reason. And ever since your patrols have been attacking and stealing and degrading us. It's time we finally fight back."

"Leave him alone." Mossrain slipped in front of his apprentice, fur bristling. "What Brookstar did is the fault of no one, but what has happened since then has been caused by both sides. Any pain caused now just makes it worse."

"Maybe," Pouncefoot admitted with an icy voice, "maybe not. But EchoClan has always tried to rule the other Clans. And you all need to be taught a lesson." His teeth gleamed in the light and he took a threatening step forward, but a loud yowl echoed over the moor before he could do anything else. All the cats looked to see Sorrelfur was returning, a black cat running alongside her, followed quickly by a tan-brown tabby. Even from a distance Ravenpaw could recognize the tabby as Poppysong, and relief filled his heart.

The three cats skidded to a stop next to them. Mossrain instantly dipped his head to the black she-cat. "Dewnose." The deputy! Anxiety started to seep back into Ravenpaw's body when he noticed Dewnose's harsh expression, but then he saw it was actually rested

on her own Clanmates.

"Pouncefoot! How dare you unsheathe your claws in the direction of a medicine cat!" the she-cat hissed. "Step back, *now*!" The dark ginger tom looked furious, but he hid his claws and forced himself back to Briarcloud's side. She looked at Mossrain and dropped her head. "Mossrain, I apologize for anything and everything my warriors may have said."

"Thank you, Dewnose," Mossrain struggled to make his voice calm. He looked worriedly down at Ravenpaw. "Are you okay, Ravenpaw?" The apprentice struggled to nod his head, still scared of warriors who had threatened him.

"I would've thought better of my Clanmates." Dewnose shot a cold glance at her warriors, then looked at Ravenpaw. "I'm sorry if they scared you. Briarcloud, Pouncefoot, Swiftrunner--you are all to apologize for what you said to both these cats. They spend every day of their lives helping others, and you will not disrespect them for that."

The cats hesitated, then Briarcloud finally dipped her head. "I'm sorry."

"Sure, me too." Swiftrunner, the black and white tom, turned his head away as he spoke.

"I want real apologies," Dewnose snapped. "Respond like warriors, not scolded kits!"

"We're sorry for wanting to avenge our history--is that what you want us to say?" Pouncefoot growled.

"Excuse me?" Dewnose sounded quite surprised, and looked at Mossrain. "What did they say to you?"

Mossrain looked briefly at his paws before looking her in the eyes and answering honestly, "Pouncefoot claimed he wanted revenge for what had happened to Flowerheart."

"Really?" Poppysong's ears flattened. "You're using an old nursery tale to fuel your anger?" She looked sadly at Mossrain. "I'm so sorry,

to the both of you. I know you didn't mean for this to happen. Ravenpaw, are you okay?" Her eyes showed real concern, and the apprentice found himself calmed by it.

"Yes," he murmured softly.

"Pouncefoot, you have no reason to ever act this way! Any of you! You're lucky Sorrelfur had some sense, or you might've made the biggest mistake of your lives! The three of you--back to camp!" Briarcloud was off in an instant, followed slowly by Swiftrunner. "Pouncefoot, are you waiting to get in more trouble?"

With a soft growl, the dark ginger tom whipped around and bounded after his Clanmates. With a sad blink at the EchoClan cats, Sorrelfur turned to follow. Dewnose turned back to them. "I will admit, I am not happy about the EchoClan attack, but I know that my warriors had first agitated yours. They admitted it at camp, and I honestly wasn't completely surprised to find your warriors on our territory--but I know it wasn't your fault. No medicine cat would allow harm to others."

Mossrain dipped his head. "I was not all too happy about it either, but warriors will be warriors." Ravenpaw was surprised by the amused gleam in Mossrain's eyes. Surprisingly, Dewnose returned it.

"That they will be," she meowed. Ravenpaw suddenly understood why Dewnose was SageClan deputy--she was level-headed, and she was fair, too. She did not overthink simple battles and fights, and obviously believed the two Clans could get along better once the anger between them calmed.

If Eagleclaw becomes leader, perhaps that will be true, he thought hopefully.

"Thank you, Dewnose. I won't forget your help, but we should be returning home now." His tail curled over Ravenpaw's back.

The black she-cat nodded her head in understanding, brown eyes soft. "I understand--walk safely, Mossrain. And your apprentice. I shall see you at the next Gathering." She dipped her head again.

"And I you," Mossrain agreed, leading Ravenpaw toward their forest territory. Ravenpaw felt the cats' eyes on his retreating form for a few moments before he heard them heading away.

Ravenpaw was quiet for a little while, walking along Mossrain's side, occasionally feeling the brush of his soft fur. "Did Brookstar really kill SageClan's medicine cat?" Ravenpaw asked quietly.

Mossrain sighed, hesitating with his reply. "Yes, she did. She killed many cats, many we probably don't even know about. After Firebreeze was exiled, SageClan's youngest medicine cat--they had two at the time--agreed to come and train an apprentice. Once the cat, I believe called Nettlefall, was fully trained, Flowerheart tried to return to SageClan, but Brookstar attacked and killed her. It's believed it's because she knew EchoClan secrets, and the leader didn't want them getting out. Brookstar then forced Nettlefall to almost instantly take an apprentice, called Cedarbreeze. About two moons after he had finished his training did his mentor mysteriously died. Brookstar had killed her, too, because she was scared the medicine cat would be soft on SageClan. Now, our Clans fight over the simplest things; perhaps by now most of it does not actually come from the incident itself, but it is definitely what started it all."

"That's awful," Ravenpaw murmured, unable to express his displeasure any differently. He could never even picture taking another life, whether it be prey or cat. To feel his claws clotted with blood, to know he had caused another cat to be in pain... It made him shiver.

"Truly," Mossrain agreed. They, once again, fell silent as they walked the moorland. Ravenpaw's pads felt frozen by the time they finally reached the forest, the cold traveling its way up his legs and into his chest. He could see his breath forming a small cloud in front of his muzzle, chilling his whiskers each time he traveled through it. The snow had begun to fall lightly, sprinkling their coats and melting against their skin. The trees slowed the descent of some of the snow, but much was able to flutter down through the bare branches.

Though the forest was beautiful, Ravenpaw was glad to finally

return home. The snow made the rocks slick and he almost slipped, while Mossrain actually did. His front leg slid out in front of him, but he managed to catch himself quickly and stumbled back to his paws. They eventually got to the top of the pathway to the clearing, finding no guard waiting for them. *Every cat is probably too tired.* Hopefully, Eagleclaw had stopped the patrols since the medicine cats left.

The deputy, as always, was pacing the clearing. She looked gaunt and tired, but headed instantly over for the medicine cats. "Well? What did they say?" Her voice carried easily through the cold air, and a few warriors began to appear from their den. Clearly, the news of the Moonstream visit had traveled through camp. Enough cats appeared that Ravenpaw assumed Eagleclaw kept the patrols in camp so she could act immediately on the news she got.

"They did not say much," Mossrain meowed softly. "But from what I can gather, they wish for Acornstar to return."

"Obviously!" Eagleclaw hissed, her tail lashing. "She is our leader and belongs here! Now, where is she?"

"They did not say," Mossrain replied. "But I would assume, since she hasn't returned, that she has left the Clan territories, and there is only one way to go if she did, since she obviously didn't go through the Old Twolegplace."

"But we don't know how long she would've followed the Thunderpath," Eagleclaw responded.

"Well, considering the storm, it's quite possible that she hid somewhere until it passed. Maybe someone will be able to catch her scent, or find some type of trail. Besides, I doubt Acornstar had a plan when she left--maybe she just traveled along the Old Thunderpath with no plan."

Eagleclaw looked thoughtful for a few moments, then she finally nodded. "Okay. Okay. It's our best plan... It's our only plan. I'll gather the Clan and put together a patrol."

"It would be best to wait until tomorrow to send it out," Mossrain

told her before she could move away. "That way they can plan, get some rest and strength."

Eagleclaw forced a nod, then turned and bounded to the Rock Pile, leaping onto the snowy boulders. "Everybody gather here!" She didn't really seem to be in the mood to use the correct words, and waited impatiently for the entire Clan to settle in the cold, snowy clearing. Mossrain seemed a little annoyed as Silverstrike, Brightflower, and Grayblaze padded from the medicine cat's den to sit in the snow, staring up at their leader. The medicine cats padded over, and Mossrain sniffed his sister's side before settling next to her.

Ravenpaw peeked inside the den to see Blossompaw was sleeping and decided to leave her, sitting next to his mentor and looking at Eagleclaw. The moment every cat had gathered in front of her, she began, "StarClan has sent word that they wish for Acornstar to return, and I have decided to send a patrol to find her."

Instant murmurings rushed through the Clan, and Silverstrike climbed to his paws, winching slightly as his injured pad touched the cold snow. "Who says anyone wants to go? You must see reason, Eagleclaw--Acornstar is a bad leader, and you are not. You can lead us to greatness, but you must leave Acornstar alone. If she left, then she obviously doesn't want to be in charge anymore. So why not take over?"

Eagleclaw lashed her tail. "I will not lead this Clan while Acornstar lives! She must return!"

Silverstrike stared at her silently for some moments, eyes hard and thoughtful. Then, finally: "Okay."

"Okay?" Eagleclaw seemed surprised, as Ravenpaw was. Silverstrike had never agreed so quickly before, so why now?

"Yes. If you wish for us to be weakened while we search for Acornstar, then we will do it. We trust your judgment, even when it is wrong." Ravenpaw listened for a scathing tone in his mew, but it sounded quite sincere.

Eagleclaw looked at her Clan. "Does he speak for all of you?" she asked. A few cats muttered to each other quietly, but none denied it. Eagleclaw looked down for a moment, then raised her eyes to Silverstrike. "We are already weak. Leaf-bare threatens us with hunger and sickness, and our attack on SageClan has injured many of us, including you and many of your family. But I cannot take over until Acornstar returns. I hope you--all of you--will understand eventually."

Silverstrike let out a slow breath. "You don't want Acornstar back," he said softly, "you want your mother back."

Eagleclaw was silent, but the pain in her eyes was obvious. Ravenpaw peered at Silverstrike's expression and was surprised by the sad gleam in his deep gaze.

"I know the feeling," he said. "I would do anything to see Berrywhisker just once more."

Ravenpaw felt the wave of grief through the Clan at the mention of the dead elder, especially strong from Boulderclaw, who was settled next to Snowfern. Ravenpaw felt a rush of relief as his mother pressed against the large tom's side, comforting him silently. He was glad to see that they were okay again, no longer angry from their distance of the past few days. Though the white and black she-cat sent a quick glance at Grayblaze, who stood with a straight back and hard eyes in front of the medicine cat's den. Ravenpaw caught his mother's eye for a moment, and she blinked lovingly at him before looking at Eagleclaw again.

"What do you expect me to do, Silverstrike?" Eagleclaw was saying, looking much smaller than before.

"Send a patrol," he finally said. "We need a strong leader, and if bringing Acornstar back will do that for you, then it must be done. And I volunteer to lead it."

"No way!" Mossrain stood up, looking alarmed. "Silverstrike, you are much too injured for a patrol like this!"

"I'm one of the oldest in the Clan, so I'm most qualified. Besides, I

just want to get Acornstar and get home. I won't get distracted by anything or anyone. And I'll be fine, my paw is almost healed."

"And you wouldn't be leaving until tomorrow," Eagleclaw muttered, mostly to herself. Then she gave a nod. "Alright, Silverstrike, you lay lead the patrol. Are there any more volunteers?" She looked to the Clan.

The cats murmured together, some looking rather interested. Ravenpaw noticed a glow of excitement in Shadefur's eyes, and so did Petaldust. But yet, it was Silverstrike who next spoke. "Frostfall," he called to the white she-cat. She didn't seem to notice, intent on looking at Eagleclaw, so he called louder. The she-cat finally looked over.

"What?" she asked, her voice unnaturally loud as always--she always spoke just a little louder than she actually needed to.

"Will you come?" he asked. "Your nose is the best I've never known; if anyone can sniff out Acornstar's trail, it's you."

She looked embarrassed by the praise, while Eagleclaw meowed, "are you sure that's wise, Silverstrike? With her hearing problem, it might make it dangerous for her to be out in a new territory."

"I'm completely sure," the tom replied. "We can keep her safe, and she can help us find Acornstar quicker than anyone else. We'll be there and back before you know it."

Eagleclaw hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Frostfall may go."

The she-cat perked her ears forward, blue eyes narrowed in confusion.

"You may go," the deputy said louder, and the she-cat finally nodded in understanding.

"We'll go, too!" Shadefur meowed excitedly, looking over at his brother, who sat next to him. "Won't we, Stonecoat?"

The tom didn't look too happy about it, but he eventually nodded in

agreement.

Mossrain's tail flicked in fear, and he mewled weakly. "But..."

Eagleclaw actually managed a soft, quick purr. "Mossrain, Shadefur will be fine--I'm sure he can take care of himself."

Shadefur got to his paws and padded to Mossrain's side, touching his nose to his friend's cheek. "I won't take any risks, I promise."

"You better not," Mossrain finally murmured, still sounding scared. "I'm trusting you to return safe and sound. And you better not get hurt!" he added sternly.

Shadefur rubbed his head under Mossrain's chin. "I will," he murmured.

"Alright, enough of that," Eagleclaw meowed, sounding amused. Mossrain looked embarrassed by all the cats looking at him, while Shadefur just sat with his head high, pressing against the medicine cat's side. Ravenpaw caught a look at Stonecoat, and was surprised by a harsh, angry look in the tom's eyes. Why was he so jealous? Ravenpaw knew his older brothers had always been incredibly close, and he must feel a little betrayed because Shadefur was now so close with Mossrain, but friendship was nothing like the love littermates felt, surely?

"I think one or two more warriors would be a good patrol size," Eagleclaw meowed, looking back at the Clan cats.

"I'll go," Boulderclaw meowed, getting to his paws.

Eagleclaw nodded in thanks, while Ravenpaw felt a flash of fear. He already didn't really like his brothers going, but his father too? He didn't think he would be able to handle the stress! What if one of them got injured, and had no medicine cat to heal them? He stretched his claws in and out against the stone in fear, trying to keep his tail still. It seemed Mossrain had the same thought.

"What of their injuries?" Mossrain meowed. "Even if all the cats going are out of the medicine cat's den, they are still hurt and could get even more hurt out there. Or a wound could get infected, or..."

He noticed Eagleclaw's awaiting expression, and fell silent.

"I have already thought of that," Eagleclaw meowed. "Ravenpaw has been working hard by your side and has done well healing cats after the battle. I believe that Ravenpaw should join the journey to keep the cats safe, if both you and he agree."

"No way!" Snowfern jumped to her paws, bristling furiously. "You are already sending two of my kits out of the territory, and my mate! And he is much too young--he can't defend himself!"

Though Snowfern's words hurt, Ravenpaw couldn't help but agree with his mother. He had no way to protect himself, and he had only been born seven and a half moons ago. "He'll have plenty of cats to protect him," Eagleclaw told the worried she-cat softly. "And with him there, Stonecoat, Shadefur, and Boulderclaw will be much safer."

Snowfern hesitated for a moment, looking worried and confused. "Then I want to go with!" she said, scratching the ground with her claws.

"Can't wait to leave, can you?" Grayblaze muttered. Luckily, it seemed Snowfern was too distracted to actually hear him.

"Snowfern." Boulderclaw touched his nose to his mate's shoulder. "We have other kits who need to be watched. Don't leave them alone when they need you."

The she-cat looked ready to argue, but then she shut her jaws and sat, dropping her head in defeat. Ravenpaw didn't know if he was relieved or saddened.

"Can I go?"

Ravenpaw looked at the entrance of the elders' den in surprise. Jaypaw was sitting next to Dappletail, and he stepped forward on slightly unsteady paws. "I know I'm still a little injured, but I know I could be of help, and it would be good training. And, well, I don't want Ravenpaw alone..."

The medicine cat felt a large wave of love for his brother, who

looked so nervous as he stood in front of his deputy. Eagleclaw gave a soft purr. "I know the feeling of wanting to protect a littermate," the deputy said, a deep and sad memory flaring in her eyes. "I think it would be a great idea for you to join him."

I didn't know Eagleclaw had littermates. It was quite obvious they no longer lived--did the death of one or more of her kits push Acornstar farther into insanity? His excitement began to override his curiosity as he realized that, though he would be forced to travel far on a journey he didn't completely believe in, he would have his littermate alongside him. He would have his father and older brothers, too.

"But..." Snowfern began to fight the decision, then fell silent and pressed against Boulderclaw, murmuring in his ear. He dipped his head, like he was making a promise to her. It seemed to calm the white and black warrior, and she let out a low breath.

"I guess that should be enough," Eagleclaw said, sounding a little regretful. "I wish I could give you more help for your journey tomorrow, but no one has traveled as far as you probably will have to. All I can say is--"

"I have."

Eagleclaw looked to the nursery entrance, her gaze followed by everybody in the Clan. Ravenpaw shivered as he looked at Rain, the tom staring strongly at the deputy. "What?" she said in confusion.

"I have traveled far to get here," he explained. "I came here to prove myself so my daughter can live a better life. This is how I can prove my loyalty better than anything. I know how to survive without a Clan, and can help the patrol travel safely."

Ravenpaw instantly realized what Rain was telling Eagleclaw, without letting anyone realize. He was informing Eagleclaw he could make sure the patrol did not accidentally stray into MothClan territory. *Where do they even live? What if Acornstar gets attacked by them?* He looked at Eagleclaw hopefully, wishing for her to agree. The she-cat looked at Mossrain, the question in her eyes obvious. She had realized what Rain meant and wanted to know what the

medicine cat thought.

He gave a small nod of his head.

So she turned back to the brave gray tabby. "Thank you, Rain. You may join the patrol. Please use your skills to keep them safe. I promise Maple will be well taken care of while you are gone."

Goldenpool nodded her confirmation, eyes soft. She still cared about Maple, and would likely treat her as nicely as she would her own kits. Ravenpaw was proud to even just know the kind-hearted she-cat.

"Then it is settled." Eagleclaw sounded relieved. "The patrol will be lead by Silverstrike, and will consist of Frostfall, Shadefur, Stonecoat, Boulderclaw, Ravenpaw, Jaypaw, and Rain. Let StarClan go with you."

But after their distant answer at the Moonstream, Ravenpaw couldn't help but wonder if StarClan was even at the Clan territories, much less outside of it.

Sorry for the late update. The next one will be on the Saturday after this one coming up in a few days. Hopefully I'll stick to my schedule after that. Or at least I'll try.

Question #1: What are your thoughts about the cats chosen for the journey?

Question #2: What do you think will happen if the patrol finds Acornstar?

Chapter Ten

By now, Rowanpaw knew when he was dreaming. Even if he was in the forest, hunting alongside Hazelfur and Birchsplash, he knew it wasn't real, because they were happy. They laughed and joked and their eyes glowed with life like it hadn't for moons. Even when he felt the warm flesh of a mouse in his paws, feeling the blood soak into his claws, he knew it was an illusion, because he had never seen a mouse so plump, juicy and clean.

And now he knew he could do anything. So when he found himself by Hazelfur's side, hearing Birchsplash take down a squawking bird, he left the two without saying a word and ran leisurely back to camp. The ground felt strong under his paws, and though he never ran out of breath, though his gait was smooth and calm, he reached camp in no time. He jumped easily up the rocks, feeling the cold wind rush through his fur as he looked into camp.

Ashbreeze's litter was playing in the clearing, watched rather closely by Leafpelt and Brownear. The tom muttered something in the black cat's ear, and she looked excitedly at him, eyes glowing. Rowanpaw almost wondered why he was dreaming of something that didn't involve him, but pushed it out of his mind as he bounded down the rocks, crossed the clearing, and slipped inside the nursery. In an instant, Meadowkit and Primkit were twisting around his paws.

"How was hunting? When can we go with you?" Primkit rushed, sounding so happy and strong.

"Just a little over two moons left," he promised, touching his nose to her's. "Then I'll show you everything in the territory!"

"Me too?" Meadowkit asked excitedly. "I want to go see the Twolegplace again! And the pond, too!"

"Of course!" Rowanpaw meowed. "I promise to bring you right when you become an apprentice!"

After touching noses with both his sisters, he padded to Emberheart's nest, taking a long moment to just look into her eyes. That beautiful yellow gaze glowed like sunlit honey, and sadness pierced him when she lowered her eyes to look at Hopekit. The little she-kit had recently opened her eyes, and was struggling to raise herself off her stomach, her stumpy little legs covered in bright kit-fluff. Thorn-sharp claws dug against the thick moss, and he nuzzled her lovingly.

"She'll grow so big and strong," Emberheart murmured, looking at her daughter with such a happy look it made him ache.

"I'll watch over her," Rowanpaw murmured softly.

"Oh, I know, Rowanpaw." Emberheart looked at him again, and he felt his legs wobble under her motherly gaze. "But you don't need to worry about that--I'll be here to raise her." She turned back to her daughter and ran her tongue along the small kit's back.

No, you won't be, *he wanted to say, because he knew she was gone. He knew that once he woke, he would go to the nursery to find Hopekit against Rainsong's belly, never to see her mother like Rowanpaw was able to, with shining fur and glowing eyes; nor would she get to hear the honey-soft voice that Rowanpaw missed so much. Hopekit would never hear her mother praise her after catching her first prey, or feel the brush of her fur on cold days in the territory as they traveled side by side, alone except for each other.*

"I miss you so much..." he couldn't help but whisper.

Emberheart looked up at him, her eyes weak and terribly sad. "Then why didn't you save me?" she whispered. "You could've helped me, but you were weak."

Pain tore at his heart. "I'm sorry," he rasped, feeling weak and desperate. He just wanted to brush against her fur, to hear her voice when it was soft and loving, not the deep anguish that filled it now. He wanted her to lay against his side and have her whisper that everything would be all right. "I just want you back... I want everything to be okay..."

"It isn't okay," Emberheart growled back. "And it never will be. All because of you--all because you let me die!"

"Rowanpaw, Rowanpaw wake up."

The apprentice jumped awake, eyes wide and heart racing. Blazepaw stood over him, looking quite worried.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly, giving Rowanpaw's ear a soft lick.

Rowanpaw shook him away, scrambling to his paws. The dry, dirty moss stuck uncomfortably to his fur, though shaking his coat didn't get it off. "What?" he grumbled, sitting down heavily and running a paw over face, blinking away his dream.

"You were mumbling in your sleep, and seemed uncomfortable," Blazepaw explained, anxiously shifting on his paws. Rowanpaw checked the small den and saw it was empty, finding that he liked it more that way. In the past few days, Frondpaw and Carppaw had done their best to stay well away from Rowanpaw, and he was fine with it like that. He didn't have to deal with pointless conversations or annoying questions about how he was doing.

"Where's the sun?" he grumbled, scratching his side with one back paw. The movement was harsh on his muscles, sore from hunting for the entire day with only a mouse and a frog to show all the time he spent.

"Near the top of the sky, maybe a few hours until then." Blazepaw softly licked his brother's neck, and Rowanpaw didn't complain. Taking his silence for agreement, the brown tom continued to clean the grumpy apprentice's coat.

"Where's Hazelfur?" Rowanpaw had been expecting to be woken quite early to spend the day hunting, like always.

"She took Bloomcloud's place on the dawn patrol," Blazepaw explained softly, "so now she's sleeping. I'm sure she'll wake in a bit and take you out. Maybe I can join you, since Bloomcloud is resting." Rowanpaw did not prompt him, but yet the tom continued with, "she's not well, you know. Bloomcloud. Sandflight says she's ill but doesn't know what with. It's not whitecough or greencough or anything. She's just... weak."

Rowanpaw looked at him with a blank expression. "And?"

Sadness flared in the young tom's eyes. "You haven't really been in camp the last few days, and when you are you're sleeping or in the nursery. Maybe you should visit Bloomcloud, just check on her. I'm sure she misses you. We all do."

Rowanpaw just blinked. "There's no reason for her to miss me," he murmured.

Blazepaw's eyes flashed. "Of course there is!" his voice raised a surprising amount. "She raised us! She acted as our mother when no one else did!"

"Emberheart did," Rowanpaw whispered, turning his eyes to his paws. "Emberheart treated me like a son, but I never realized until she was gone."

Blazepaw pressed up against him, and Rowanpaw was too tired to fight it. Too broken. "Bloomcloud still raised you, taught you right from wrong. Don't you remember curling up with Sparkkit, Carppaw, and Frondpaw? Tucking into her side and listening to her stories?" Blazepaw spoke softly in his ear, like he was speaking to a young kit. But Rowanpaw barely noticed. He barely heard.

He was just thinking of Emberheart.

He wished he was dreaming again, so he could feel her fur whether it was real or not, taste her scent whether it was a facade or really still drifting through his scent glands. He wanted to see the glow in her eyes, to hear her soft voice. He wanted her alive. He wanted her alive so badly that it burned in his chest like a fire, unrestrained and unstable.

"I need her..." Rowanpaw whispered. "I need her so much..."

Blazepaw seemed to understand. "I know you miss Emberheart," he murmured, resting his muzzle against the side of his brother's neck. "But she's gone. One day you'll see her in StarClan, but not yet. For now, you just have to live for her, survive to help Hopekit become a great warrior."

Rowanpaw decided not to challenge the fact that he would not see Emberheart in StarClan, because he knew StarClan did not exist. They were a nursery tale, there to make cats feel better about death--but he knew there was no afterlife. When he died, everything would be gone, and he could finally be away from all the grief and anger and hunger. Instead, he murmured, "and who says she'll survive?"

Blazepaw let out a sigh, and curled his tail around his brother's flank. "We have to believe," he breathed. After a few moments of silence, the young tom stood and shook out his fur. "Come on, you need to get out of this den. Let's get some fresh air--maybe Hazelfur will be ready to go out again. We could find something for Bloomcloud and Rainsong to eat, huh?"

Rowanpaw didn't respond, but dragged himself to his paws, shook his coat again, and regretfully dragged himself after his brother. He just wanted to sleep so he could see Emberheart, and maybe Sparkkit would visit him again. *Why can't this be the dream?* he wondered dimly.

Without a word, he followed Blazepaw into the clearing and to the warriors' den, sitting down and uselessly cleaning his back while he waited.

"Hazelfur?" he called.

After a few moments, the pretty she-cat slipped out of the den, shaking her coat and stretching her jaws wide. "Ready to go hunting?" she yawned. "Birchsplash will be joining us." As she said this, the black and white tom appeared as well from the den.

"Ready to go?" he asked, flicking his heavy tail.

"Let's catch something warm!" Blazepaw meowed excitedly, twitching his ears.

"Here's hoping," Hazelfur sighed, then flicked her tail and led the cats for the camp entrance. Rowanpaw tugged along at the back of the group, keeping his eyes on his paws. Traveling up the rocks, he waited until his Clanmates had leaped over the edge before joining

them. Hazelfur looked at him with a worried expression, but then turned away and continued on. Soon, the patrol spread out, stepping softly over the cold snow.

It sent a chilling burn into Rowanpaw's pads, but he found it strangely comforting. It allowed him to feel something other than the dark sadness plaguing his shattered, iced-over heart. There was no sign of any prey except for the faint trace of a sparrow that had already disappeared, and no sound except for the crunching of snow under paw. The group traveled silently for some time, with Rowanpaw only seeing flashes of his brother's pelt, which blended in with the territory rather well.

Then, finally, when he knew they were getting close to the Old Thunderpath, he heard soft pawsteps behind him and looked to see Hazelfur approaching. Her eyes told him she had found prey, and with a flick of her tail she lead him to where Blazepaw was searching. The moment he saw them, the brown tom followed his brother and the warrior deeper into the pines. Eventually they found Birchsplash, who nodded his head toward a large yet skinny rat digging in the snow near the trunk of a tree, searching among the roots for food.

Hazelfur used her tail to point at Rowanpaw and direct him to the right, while she did the same to Blazepaw, telling him to go around the rat until he was facing her again. Silently, the two apprentices made a large circle around the creature, falling into a crouch once they were where they were supposed to be. The snow felt freezing, so close to his soft belly. Rowanpaw did his best to suppress a shiver.

He watched closely as Hazelfur made her way around until she was protecting the last way the rat could go. Birchsplash waited for a moment, letting out a slow breath, then he began to stalk forward. Rowanpaw noticed by the tilt of his body that when he launched, he was aiming it so if he missed, the mouse would run toward Hazelfur.

This caused a flare of frustration in his heart. Why didn't the tom trust Rowanpaw or Blazepaw to catch the rat? Sure, they had only been training for two moons, but they were young and healthy and

fast despite their hunger. It wasn't fair that Birchsplash was readying himself in such a way. Rowanpaw swallowed the growl rising in his throat and forced himself to watch as the black and white warrior bunched his muscles and pushed off from the snowy ground. The leap was a good one, but Birchsplash was weak from many hungry moons and fell just short of the rat.

Squealing, it turned and bolted straight for Hazelfur. She raced right at it, swiping a paw, but the rat quickly dodged to one side then raced away over the snow. Instantly, the four cats gave chase, thundering after the creature. The ground was hard from frost under the snow, and Rowanpaw found he was gaining speed, but then the rat suddenly dived into the snow, and when the cats skidded to a stop next to it, panting, they found a small hole that traveled deep underground.

Birchsplash sighed, weakly clawing at the hole. "That would've made a great meal," he muttered.

"It could've saved a life," Hazelfur agreed quietly. Anger surged in Rowanpaw's chest, and he whipped around and stalked away. "Where are you going?" Hazelfur called.

"Hunting!"

"I'll come with!" He heard Blazepaw's quick, desperate pawsteps, but then Rowanpaw whipped around and hissed at him. Blazepaw's eyes went wide, and he stopped in shock, looking not only sad, but frightened, too.

Rowanpaw just turned again and headed away on hard paws. No cat followed him, and soon he was in a silent, snow-covered forest with no other life in sight. No prey crossed his path, but that didn't matter--he was not planning on hunting in the marshy pine forest. But yet he kept his ears perked, just to make sure he wasn't being followed. He would not be stopped, nor would he be interrupted. He would not allow it.

Soon enough, he reached the end of their small, useless territory. In front of him was the Old Thunderpath, covered with a thick layer of untouched snow. Across from him was the tall, leafless oak trees of

EchoClan territory. With a slow, determined breath, Rowanpaw stepped onto the path before him, feeling the snow break and feeling the hard ground underneath.

For so long, he had been interested in the great forest that stood just out of reach, but now he was finally approaching the trees, staring up at the leafless branches. Finally, after what seemed like a moon of walking, he touched the soft snow-covered grass. The sappy smell of the pine forest faded from his scent glands and he found himself surrounded by the wonderful smell of sweet ferns, soft bracken, and countless other things he couldn't even begin to describe.

Despite the cold wind ruffling his pelt and the freezing snow chilling his paws, he had never felt so warm and alive. He just stood there, taking in everything. The bare branches sent streaking shadows onto his pelt. Even the Gathering Hollow had not felt this amazing, as the other cats had taken some of the beautiful scenery away. But being alone, only hearing the life of the forest around him... It sent shivers through his spine.

A sweet scent fluttered to him, filling his body with an amazing feeling. He spied through the very light amount of leaf-bare undergrowth to see a large, plump squirrel scuttling over the snow, clawing at the base of a tree much like the rat from earlier.

Instinctively, Rowanpaw lowered his body into a crouch, stalking forward with silent pawsteps that silently broke the snow under him. His tail curled against his flank, and his ears flattened against his head. His eyes were in focused, narrow slits, staring down the creature in front of him. He was getting closer and closer without the creature even noticing, using a patch of bracken for cover, slipping under the fronds and feeling them brush softly against his skin.

When he was as close as he could get, seeing the clean, smooth fur of the squirrel and already tasting its flesh in his mouth, he bunched his muscles and jumped. Despite his starvation, despite how weak he was, his leap was perfect, and he landed squarely on the squirrel's back, feeling its back bones crack and crumple under his touch.

He leaned his muzzle down, taking a deep sniff of it's warm, sweet smell. Hunger clawed at his stomach, and for a moment he considered devouring the prey right then, but he knew that Hopekit needed it. The poor, tiny kit, with her eyes barely even open, the single thing he loved more than himself, besides his brother, of course. He suddenly felt slightly bad for getting so angry at Blazepaw before, but he knew it had been necessary in order to feed Hopekit.

Gripping the squirrel softly in his jaws, he padded for his home. He took his time to gaze at the beautiful forest, just taking in everything he could. He wondered how it would look in greenleaf, standing deep in the woods with bright green everywhere around him. He found himself reaching the Old Thunderpath much too soon. Disappointment sparked in his belly, mixing with his hunger.

Feeling a twitch in his paws, Rowanpaw cleared some snow from the path before him, set the squirrel down, and turned back to EchoClan territory. He headed in with determined paws, keeping his mouth open to search for any living creature, and his ears were perked for the sound of pawsteps, whether from BatClan or EchoClan cats.

He felt a flash of frustration at how quickly mouse came to his nose. How come EchoClan territory, even if leaf-bare, was crawling with prey? With surprising speed, Rowanpaw crouched, stalked forward, and leaped. The mouse squealed as he landed right next to it, but he managed to swipe out one paw to dig his claws into it's tiny flank. It cried even louder, and he desperately wrapped his jaws around its head and squeezed until it was silent. With it's blood filling his mouth and tickling the short fur on his muzzle, Rowanpaw brought up his head and waited in silence, listening desperately for any sound.

But there was nothing. He was safe.

Feeling strong and free, Rowanpaw grabbed the mouse and trotted confidently for the Old Thunderpath, tail high in the air. When he reached the path, he went back to the squirrel, dropped the mouse, and took a large bite from its side. The flavor was indescribable. It was like nothing the young apprentice had ever eaten, sweet and

strong, unlike the dry, tasteless prey he was used to. In just a few moments he had completely cleaned the meat from the tiny bones, and carelessly threw the remains back into EchoClan territory before grabbing the squirrel and heading over the path and into his territory. The squirrel's strong smell kept away most of the sappy scent coming from the trees, but there was still enough to make him slightly sick. The ground, though mostly frozen, was still slightly mushy and gross under paw.

He felt warm and alive from eating the mouse, and ran at a slow, leisurely pace through the pine woods, not minding the weight of the squirrel and how it's tail dragged through the snow. He was getting tired by the time he was nearing the camp, and slowed to a comfortable walk. Reaching the small cliff, he leaped up the ledges quite easily, the squirrel hitting his chest at every jump.

He stood proudly at the top of the entrance, looking down on the clearing. There was only a few cats there--Bloomcloud was laying outside the warriors' den, eyes barely open and staring out sightlessly; Blazepaw was trying to clean his fur in front of the apprentices' den log; while Hazelfur and Birchsplash were near the bottom of the rocky path, deep in conversation.

Ruffling his fur, Rowanpaw trotted confidently down the boulders, feeling the trampled snow tickle his pads and risk him getting unsteady. Hazelfur looked at him, opening her mouth to say something, but then she fell silent as her eyes narrowed on the squirrel. "Where did you get that?" she asked, sounding suspicious. Her fur bristled the tiniest bit as he passed by without saying anything.

But he did not get far across the clearing before she stepped in front of him, her yellow eyes hard and cold. "Where did you get that?"

Anger trickled through Rowanpaw's pelt, and he dropped the prey onto the stone, knowing the cold ground would taint it's perfect warmness. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it does!" Her pelt rippled with frustration, and she brought her muzzle close to the squirrel's red coat, then she snorted and rose her head, eyes in slits. "This smells of EchoClan," she

growled.

"It ran across the border," he growled.

But then Hazelfur leaned toward his muzzle, sniffing again, and Rowanpaw realized he had not yet cleaned his muzzle of blood. "And did the mouse you ate crawl down your throat?" she hissed, tail lashing.

"I couldn't carry a mouse and a squirrel," he said carelessly. Though it was true, it was, quite obviously, not his real reasoning, and Hazelfur saw through that immediately.

"How *dare* you hunt in another Clan's territory!" she growled. Blazepaw and Birchsplash were both watching, and Rowanpaw hated seeing a disappointed gleam in his brother's eyes. How could he judge Rowanpaw? He was just trying to help his Clan!

"It's not hurting anybody!" He matched the she-cat's furious gaze. "Why should we starve while EchoClan grows fat? They can spare some prey for those who need it!"

"That does not matter!" Hazelfur was shaking with anger, and her eyes blazed like fire. But this just caused Rowanpaw to become even more infuriated. "We follow the warrior code--no matter what!"

"Even when our Clanmates are dying?" he retorted.

Hazelfur looked ready to snap back, but then she took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she forced herself to calm, but when her eyelids opened he could see the anger still twisting and turning in there, seething beneath the surface. "I know it's hard to watch, but we must stick to the warrior code. Despite our hunger, we must prove we are not savages, that we are still warriors."

"We can't be warriors if we all starve!" he retorted.

Hazelfur swallowed a growl. "Rowanpaw," she spoke his name softly, as if to make sure Bloomcloud did not over. "What you have done could ruin Dawnstar's plan. Why would the other Clans allow us some of their territory if they think we are thieves?"

"I won't let Hopekit die!" Rowanpaw snapped.

"You may have just sentenced her to death!" Hazelfur couldn't hold in her anger any longer. "If you had any foresight you would've realized that!"

"If *you* or any of the other cats in this stupid Clan had any foresight, you would've started hunting in other territories moons ago, and maybe we wouldn't be living like scurrying rats!"

Hazelfur's eyes were icy cold. "Some cats are more rat than others."

The words sent a sharp pain of sadness through Rowanpaw's heart, but Hazelfur's gaze showed no remorse.

The young tom had never felt a stronger urge to slice a cat's throat, except for every moment he laid eyes on Aspenheart.

Snatching up the squirrel, Rowanpaw barged past the light brown warrior, relishing in the boiling rage in his belly because he yet again had another feeling other than devastating sadness. He passed the warriors' den on hard paws, sending a brief glance at Bloomcloud. She looked tired and weak, with her ribs incredibly obvious, jutting out of her sides. Her flanks were shallow and her face was thin. For a tiny moment, Rowanpaw considered giving her a part of the squirrel, but Rainsong needed as much as he could give her, and he was already planning to give some of the meat to his sisters. Bloomcloud would be fine.

Rainsong was licking Flintkit's fluffy dark gray side, but raised her eyes with a twitching nose when Rowanpaw entered, the squirrel swinging from his jaws. Ashbreeze was sleeping, her face tucked deep into her side, pressed against little Bluekit's fur. Primkit, Meadowkit, and Fernkit were laying tiredly in their nest, looking bored beyond anything, but each raised their head as they scented his prey.

Dropping the squirrel, the tom cut the squirrel down the middle, held it down by its back haunches, then grabbed it's shoulders and tugged. It resisted for a moment then broke apart. He set the front of the squirrel in Rainsong's nest then gave the end to his sister's,

knowing the tail might make a fun toy once they had the strength of prey inside their bodies. Seeing the fresh blood the squirrel had left on the ground, Rowanpaw licked the stone clean with his tongue, shivering at the taste of warm blood. Even after eating the mouse, the warm blood was entrancing and delicious.

When there was nothing else to do but watch the she-cats nibbling at their meals, he turned and padded out of the den, immediately finding himself facing Hazelfur. "We're not finished," she said firmly, her eyes harsh.

"There's nothing else to say," he responded, slipping past her and heading for the camp entrance.

Hazelfur loped after him, once again blocking his path. He stopped, annoyed, and lashed his tail back and forth. "You will be staying in camp for the next quarter moon, and you can forget about going to the next three Gatherings! I think you've spent plenty of time in EchoClan's forest." Her mew was quick and harsh.

"You can't keep me in camp!" Rowanpaw hissed. "The Clan will starve without every available hunter!"

"You should've thought of that before!" Hazelfur retorted. "You're lucky I don't keep you in for a half moon instead! You need to learn your manners if you ever want to be a warrior!"

"I don't care about being a warrior!" Rowanpaw snarled. "I just need to keep Hopekit alive and strong! You can't do anything to me--you just talk and talk. What do you plan to do, attack me?" With a shattered heart colder than the snow outside and eyes as hard as stone, Rowanpaw stalked past the warrior and made a determined pace for the pine forest.

Hopefully the wait was worth it! Remember to leave a vote or comment if you enjoyed so I know about your existence, it honestly helps me get motivation to write.

Question #1: What are your thoughts about Rowanpaw's attitude?

Question #2: What do you think could get Rowanpaw back to his

old self, or at least feeling a little better/nicer?

Chapter Eleven

By the time the next dawn rose after the meeting, Ravenpaw had only slept for a few hours, having drifted in and out of sleep. Worry twisted in his belly, and his legs were still sore from scouring the territory for all the herbs needed for the many traveling herbs they had made the night before, stopping only when the moon had risen high into the sky. He could see them now, eight bundles sitting in front of the herb storage, ready to be eaten.

He realized he couldn't feel Mossrain's fur against his haunches, and tiredly raised his head to look around. He spotted the tom by Grayblaze's nest, his form highlighted by the pale light shining in through the den entrance.

"Mossrain?" he said softly, blinking sleep from his eyes. The tom looked over, hazel gaze dull with exhaustion. "Is Grayblaze alright?" It seemed like the gray tom was sleeping--Mossrain was just sat next to him, staring down into the tom's nest.

"He's fine," Mossrain sighed, getting to his paws and padding over to Ravenpaw. The tom settled into his nest, and by the shiver through his body, it was cold, meaning Mossrain had likely not been in the nest for quite some time, maybe not at all.

"Are *you* alright?" he asked quietly, flicking his tail over to touch Mossrain's flank. The young tom looked softly at his apprentice.

"I'm worried," he murmured. "Shadefur going on the mission is scary enough, but you as well..." Mossrain shifted in the moss.

"I'll try my best to remember everything, and to keep everyone healthy," Ravenpaw told him, remembering how long he had spent after the meeting just going over healing herbs not only with his mentor but also on his own.

"Oh, I know you can do that," Mossrain soothed. "I have complete

faith in you, but there are enemies out there--foxes, badgers... MothClan..."

"That's why Rain's coming," the black apprentice reminded him. "The other patrol members might not know, but Rain is going to make sure we're safe from his old home."

"You're still so far from your Clan, though..." Mossrain was quiet for a few moments, looking away to the opening of the cave, and Ravenpaw allowed him the time to think. Then, finally, his mentor shook out his fur and decided, "but we must keep faith. We have to remind ourselves that StarClan is with us...even when they're silent..."

Ravenpaw watched his mentor sympathetically, but he said nothing. He just sat his head on the side of his nest. Fear was still giving him a stomach ache, and he was dreading for when the patrol would finally leave.

Why did StarClan let Acornstar leave? he wondered. Wouldn't it have been easier to tell Mossrain about Acornstar's plan, or inform him right away that when she raced from camp after almost killing Blossompaw that she wasn't planning on returning? Ravenpaw still shivered as he remembered that night. Would Acornstar really have killed his sister if he hadn't woken? Would she have murdered the young cat without care, just for what she believed was right?

The voice.

Who had spoken to him? It was familiar, so he knew he had heard it before. It wasn't Berrywhisker, nor was it Violetfrost. Was it Echo? He had not seen her for quite some time, since Maple had joined the Clan about half a moon before. But he would recognize her voice--though he almost did. Thinking of the voice from a few days ago, he realized that though he knew it wasn't Echo's, it had sounded much like her. Also a little like Sage.

Was it Ash? He had never heard Echo's sister speak, as she was so small and young and he only had so much time with them, but the mew reminded him of both Echo and Sage, so couldn't it be her? But why would Echo send her sister to him, and not herself? *Is*

something going wrong in StarClan? Is Echo okay?

Before he could worry himself anymore, Silverstrike entered the den. He had refused to sleep in the medicine cat's den the night before, claiming he wanted to be with his fellow warriors for at least one night. His gait seemed smooth as he entered the den. "It's time," he told Mossrain simply.

With a terrified tingle through his body, Ravenpaw forced himself to stand. The apprentice and warrior took their herbs inside the den, and despite being used to the taste of herbs he still found the mixed tangs harsh and uncomfortable. His muzzle curled, though he noticed Silverstrike doing his best to hide his disgust. Ravenpaw still felt bad that one of the tom's ears was almost completely gone, though he didn't seem to mind that much himself.

Mossrain helped them carry the six other bundles into the clearing, where the patrol members were waiting by the forest camp entrance. Eagleclaw was with them, speaking softly with Rain a little away from the other cats. "So if a cat is running right at you, you go straight for them and at the last moment duck down and slide under their front legs, then jut upward as fast as you can, just a little toward one side of their body. It'll knock them over, no doubt about it, though if you're not fast enough you could get some clawed haunches," Rain was saying.

Ravenpaw was happy to hear such a bright tone in the tom's voice, and was even more surprised to see a small gleam in Eagleclaw's troubled gaze. "That's a great move," she said softly. "Perhaps once you return, you could show some of the warriors. I bet there are a great number of moves you can show us."

"What could a rogue teach us?" Silverstrike called over, dropping the herb bundles on the snowy clearing.

"Quite a lot, I bet," Rain retorted, flicking his tail calmly.

Silverstrike narrowed his eyes, looking cold. "Not as much as I could teach you, rogue."

"Rain is not a rogue," Eagleclaw told Silverstrike firmly.

"We'll he's certainly not a Clanmate!" The silver tabby briefly scratched at the snow.

Eagleclaw lashed her tail, taking a deep breath. "Silverstrike, Rain may have not been here for that long, but he will be a part of this Clan until the day he dies."

Rain looked surprised at this, like he had not known he was truly apart of the Clan as of yet. Silverstrike looked furious, despite always taking Eagleclaw's side. The silver tabby took a step closer to Eagleclaw, raising his tail. "If that were true, you'd give him his warrior name, wouldn't you?"

Eagleclaw stared at him coldly. "So if he had a warrior name, you'd treat him like a Clanmate?" she asked.

Silverstrike narrowed his eyes, silent for a few moments. Then, finally, he murmured, "I would trust him if I knew for sure you did as well. But that wouldn't make me take orders from him."

"I do trust him," Eagleclaw responded. "And you do not have to take orders from him, as you are equals. You are both warriors of EchoClan, and should offer advice when you can, and take advice even when it is not needed."

"If you're so sure about that, then give him a warrior name."

Ravenpaw was surprised by Silverstrike's words, but quickly realized that, of course, the tom was trying to push Eagleclaw into leadership. He was trying to get her to take over, to prove she did not need her mother. He noticed the challenging gleam in the tom's eye, and was a little upset that Eagleclaw did not match it. Why couldn't the she-cat just agree, to give up the patrol before she even sent it out? He desperately wanted to stay home, to help Mossrain and be with his family.

"When Acornstar returns, she can do it herself. Rain must be recognized by StarClan, and they will not accept him if the ceremony is done by me." Eagleclaw sat calmly, wrapping her tail around her paws. "Each of you, eat your herbs and get ready to leave."

As the patrol began to swallow down their tangy bundles, Ravenpaw went to the edge of camp and stared out over the snowy moorland. The river looked so small from here, like a thin slit the thickness of a single claw. He could see the dip far across the sloping hills that made SageClan's camp, but from this distance, he couldn't see any cats.

Rain padded up to Ravenpaw's side, still licking herbs from his muzzle. "I've never taken herbs for anything but injuries," the tom said softly, still looking disgusted. "What are they supposed to do?"

"They give you strength and make it so you don't get hungry," Ravenpaw explained. "They'll only last for today, until sundown, I think Mossrain said. But it will let us get a good start."

Rain nodded slowly. "I suppose that makes sense." He flicked his tail softly on Ravenpaw's side to say goodbye, then padded back to the group, sitting a little away from them. Ravenpaw joined him, but settled against Jaypaw's side. Boulderclaw, who was sat near by, gave him a soft nod.

"I am proud of all of you," Eagleclaw meowed to the group, her eyes soft and sincere. "Silverstrike, I am trusting you to lead this patrol with all the intelligence you have shown throughout your many moons as a warrior. Find my mother and bring her home."

The silver tom dipped his head. "Of course, Eagleclaw." He stood up and flicked his tail to the patrol cats. "Let's head out."

"Would you like to eat first?" Eagleclaw asked. "I know the herbs take away the hunger, but we don't want you weak. I told the dawn patrol to hunt on the way home--I'm sure they'll be back soon."

"The Clan needs the prey," Silverstrike responded calmly. "We can hunt once we leave the territory."

Eagleclaw dipped her head in acceptance as a patrol pulled themselves into camp from the forest entrance. Ravenpaw was excited to see the lead patrol member was his mother, while Willowpaw closely followed. Pebblepeak and Oakcloud trailed behind, both holding prey in their jaws.

"I'm happy we caught you!" Snowfern breathed, pressing her muzzle against Jaypaw's muzzle, then she gave Ravenpaw's forehead a lick. She licked the ears of Stonecoat and Shadefur, then tucked her head under Boulderclaw's chin. Ravenpaw liked seeing them like this, just knowing that they were happy.

"Please be safe!" Willowpaw pleaded her littermates, twirling her body around both of them. "I couldn't bare to lose either of you!"

"Don't worry," Jaypaw meowed, giving her ear a lick. "We'll be careful."

Their sister's eyes shined with anxiety. "Promise me!"

"We promise," Jaypaw told her confidently. Ravenpaw tried to feel the same, but fear was still tracing his heart like a trailing tail. What if something went wrong, or he didn't remember the right herbs? What if someone died, and StarClan was not able to bring their spirit back to the forest?

"Don't look so worried, Ravenpaw," Snowfern murmured, rubbing her cheek against his. "I believe in you, you'll do great!"

Ravenpaw knew she was just trying to make him feel better, but it did help. Forcing a nod, he followed Silverstrike and the rest of the patrol for the camp entrance.

"Silverstrike!"

The tom looked back into the clearing to see Maskdapple standing there, Petaldust beside her.

"Are you not going to say goodbye?" she asked softly, her tail twitching from where she held it against her side.

His eyes looked surprisingly emotionless. "Goodbye," he said simply, then turned and continued to leave camp. Pebblepeak looked after his father sadly, then dropped his prey and headed over to his mother.

Mossrain shook his head after the silver tom then leaned close to Ravenpaw, giving his ear a lick. "Be safe, and come back soon."

"I will, Mossrain," he promised, pressing against his mentor to take in his scent one last time. Mossrain purred softly, then stepped toward Shadefur.

For a moment, the two toms stared at each other, then Mossrain tucked his head against the older tom's chest, tail flicking scaredly. "You have to be safe, too," he grumbled.

"Of course," Shadefur murmured, stepping back and rubbing his chin against Mossrain's. He whispered something very quietly in the medicine cat's ear, and suddenly the purr in Mossrain's throat could rival that of roaring thunder. The toms pressed against each other for quite a few moments.

Feeling a little awkward, Ravenpaw wished one final goodbye to his mother and sister then hurried after the patrol, falling in step with Boulderclaw. Jaypaw joined him, while Shadefur and Stonecoat fell in behind. Silverstrike led the way down the rocks with Frostfall next to him, while Rain trailed behind the rest of the group. Ravenpaw was worried for him. How would he do with cats he barely knew? Would Silverstrike listen to his advice?

"Ravenpaw!"

The apprentice looked back to the top of the rocks to see Eagleclaw gesturing for him to come back. He quickly raced back up the rocks, taking care to not fall. "Is something wrong?" he asked, a little hopeful she would let him stay home. But he also didn't want to leave his family alone...

"I just want to tell you, if you think it will save lives, you can tell the patrol about MothClan," she explained. "I want them safe over anything else."

He nodded, feeling his anxiety tighten around him. What if he actually did have to do that? Would anybody even believe him? If Rain came to his defense, would Silverstrike turn on him?

"Good luck, Ravenpaw." Eagleclaw rested her muzzle on his forehead. Then she backed away and allowed the apprentice to head back to the patrol. Jaypaw mewed a happy greeting at his

return. As they reached the bottom of the pathway, Ravenpaw couldn't help but wonder how long they would be away. Would it be just a few days before he saw his mother again, or more than a moon? Or would leaf-bare be over by the time he saw his mentor's familiar glowing hazel eyes?

Shaking his head, he followed the patrol silently through the forest on a set trail. The medicine cat kept a close eye on his brother, particularly his shoulder, but he seemed to be doing fine, bounding forward a few times to sniff at shriveled fronds before slipping back beside his brother and father.

"So are we just hoping we'll stumble across Acornstar on the Thunderpath?" Shadefur asked.

"Did you not listen when we planned yesterday?" Silverstrike grumbled, pushing past some snowy bracken.

"Not really," the tom admitted without shame.

Silverstrike let out an annoyed sigh, and Ravenpaw decided not to mention that he had not been a part of the conversation, so he had no idea what they were going to do exactly. "Acornstar wouldn't have gotten far during the storm--I bet she got to the outside of the territory and waited for it to pass. The weather has been mild since then, so hopefully Frostfall will still be able to scent her."

"What?" The she-cat looked over in confusion, having trailed off slightly.

Surprisingly, Silverstrike gave a snort of amusement. "I said you're going to track Acornstar!" he said loudly.

"Oh." Frostfall's ears flicked in embarrassment and she lowered her head, falling back in step with the silver tom. He briefly nudged her shoulder before quickening his step.

"She'd likely shelter as close to the Thunderpath as possible, so once we get out there we'll spread out and look. Her scent might even be there, or signs of a hunt--feathers, blood, whatever."

Ravenpaw wondered why Silverstrike believed she would stay so

close, even with a storm, but he was too nervous to ask the tom. What if he got angry at the stupid question? So he stayed quiet, but it was lucky that Jaypaw was curious, too, and much braver.

"You seem so confident, why do you think she stayed close?" the little white and gray tom asked.

"Because it's what any warrior would do," Silverstrike responded simply. "She may be crazier than a fox in a fit, but she's still a warrior, and she's smart enough to know that she wouldn't be able to get anywhere with how awful that snow was. She'd wait it out then hunt something to get up her strength--that's not even a warrior's way, that's just cat instinct."

"You're not wrong," Rain meowed softly. "When I was searching for my kits, even though I was so worried and broken I knew I had to eat to keep my strength. It was not very often, but it was enough to keep me alive..."

Ravenpaw remembered how skinny the tom had been. It would've taken many moons to reach that state, and he reminded himself that Rain had spent two moons imprisoned by his old Clan, likely starved; how hard it must've been to flee with such a weakened body. Silverstrike didn't even know how far Rain had gone to find his family, how many nights he had spent just getting back to his den only to find his mate dead and kits missing.

How awful that must have been...

Ravenpaw looked at the gray tabby, watching his powerful body with rippling muscles and a high head. He looked so strong and ready for battle, despite all he had gone through. Not for the first time, the apprentice wondered if all MothClan warriors looked like him, and how the Clans would ever survive if they did.

Soon enough they broke through the snowy undergrowth to emerge onto the side of the Old Thunderpath, not far from where the mountains went right up against the path. Silverstrike led them with a confident pace to the edge of their territory, but paused briefly as he reached where the mountains cut off, curling to run along the side of the Thunderpath instead of directly at it.

With a small breath out, Silverstrike flicked his tail and led the way onto the small strip of grass. Frostfall followed close behind, while Rain took up a space behind her. Ravenpaw followed his father and littermate with Shadefur's whiskers brushing his tail. Ravenpaw noticed the anxious air around the warriors, except for Rain--even Jaypaw seemed a little nervous. Ravenpaw had a similar air around him; he had been here before, after all, and felt strangely safe with Rain's coat in view. The tom knew how to survive out here, how to get away uninjured from enemies and how to travel without overexerting yourself.

He was suddenly very glad the tom had been allowed to join, because he had a feeling it might save a life in the future.

Question #1: Do you have any predictions about what will happen with the patrol?

Question #2: How long do you think the cats will be gone from EchoClan?

Question #3: Do you think the patrol will find Acornstar and be able to bring her back?

Chapter Twelve

Rowanpaw woke as the sun barely began to color the sky. Cold wind ruffled his fur, chilling his skin. He raised his head, looking around the small den. Frondpaw and Carppaw were curled up together near the back of the log, while Blazepaw was in a tight ball not far away. Hunger clawed at Rowanpaw's belly, twisting in his gut.

He could almost still taste the wonderful mouse from EchoClan territory that he had caught the day before. For a few moments, he just lay there listening to his brother's smooth breathing, watching his side moving up and down. His ribs seemed so obvious, and Rowanpaw wondered how his brother was even getting through every day.

He needs to eat, Rowanpaw decided. *And I do, too.* He got to his paws and stretched out his back, letting his claws briefly escape their sheaths before he stood up straight. His legs felt weak with sleep and dry moss and bracken stuck to his short coat, but he only gave a small shake before padding to the entrance of the den. He peered out, looking up at the pathway out of camp.

The figure he saw there, shadowed fur beginning to brighten by the sun, caused a deep surge of hatred in his chest. Aspenheart briefly leaned down to lick her chest before returning her hidden gaze to the pine woods. *Who would trust that traitor to guard camp?* He wouldn't have been surprised if she disappeared in the night to go have more kits that would end up abandoning her.

He briefly wondered how to get past her, but his answer came quite quickly--he spotted Dawnstar padding out of her den, shaking her fur clear before heading over to the warriors' den. She gave a soft call inside, and out came Brownear and Juniperfur. With a nod to her warriors, the leader led them to the camp entrance, passing Aspenheart without even a look in her direction before they left.

He waited a few moments after the cats disappeared before leaving

his den and padding confidently across the clearing, leaping up the rocks with pride in his step. Aspenheart looked over at his approach, eyes widening in surprise. "Ratpaw!" she said, sounding a little hoarse. "What are you doing?"

He considered not answering her, but he didn't want to risk her following. "I'm joining the dawn patrol," he snapped. "Because I'm here to actually *help* my Clan."

She opened her jaws briefly, then lowered her head and let him pass without a fight. Scoffing at her uselessness, Rowanpaw leaped down into the snowy pine forest and set off at a determined pace for EchoClan territory. He knew the dawn patrol would go toward the pond first, then follow the Old Thunderpath from that direction--he would just have to stay in EchoClan territory long enough for them to pass by.

The ground was still hard from the cold night, and he was able to travel quickly. He also found the leaf-bare winds and snow covered up the scent of sap quite well, so he was free from the sticky smell that always made it hard to breath. The sun made a slow way across the sky as he went, and was turning the dark blue expanse yellow and orange by the time he saw the EchoClan woods.

He paused briefly before the Old Thunderpath, sniffing the air and perking his ears. But no scent nor sound came to him, and he traveled across the path without trouble, slipping into the snowy brush on the other side. It was cold on his pelt but he loved the feeling of the ferns, and curled himself around the underbrush. He searched for the smell of any creature, but there was nothing this close to the Old Thunderpath.

Suddenly, he heard a movement in the bushes, with the sound of a soft voice. "Are you sure the patrol won't leave without us? I would hate not saying goodbye to Ravenpaw and Jaypaw!"

Fear trickled through his body, and, thinking quickly, the apprentice raced to a patch of strong-smelling herbs, tucking his body under the thick bush. The scent filled his nose and clotted his throat, but he stayed put the best he could as the sounds got closer and closer. The first cat to appear was a small, lithe white she-cat

with a black face tail, legs, and ears, with icy blue-green eyes that searched the forest warily. Rowanpaw recalled that she was from BatClan--Snowfern, he was pretty sure her name was. Following her was a cat that looked almost exactly like her, except she was probably just over seven moons old. Rowanpaw remembered her from the Gathering--*Willowpaw, I think.*

"Don't worry," Snowfern was saying, "Eagleclaw won't let them leave until we return, I'm sure of it."

"I hope they find Acornstar quickly," a young gray tabby with white front paws meowed, his large shoulders brushing against ferns as he sniffed at its roots. "I think I smell mouse," he meowed.

The oldest cat in the patrol, a rather handsome brown tabby tom, followed the young warrior and opened his mouth near the underbrush. "I smell blood as well," he said in a voice surprisingly quiet and soft for his large body shape. He raised his eyes, searching the forest without glimpsing Rowanpaw--the apprentice was glad his brown pelt hid him well in the shadows.

"It may have been the dusk patrol yesterday," Snowfern suggested, her tail flicking smoothly.

"Perhaps." The old tom sniffed around a little more, then the patrol pushed through the last of the brush to reach the side of the path in order to mark their territory. He was about to sneak off when he noticed the apprentice padding over to a bramble bush.

"There are mouse bones in here!" she called to the older cats.

Instantly, the three cats approached her, and she respectfully fell back. The large brown tabby nosed through the branches for a moment then pulled out a mouse's skeleton with his teeth. Rowanpaw knew it was his catch from yesterday, and recalled his fight with Hazelfur the day before.

Why would the other Clans allow us some of their territory if they think we are thieves?

A brief flame of worry wiggled through his belly, but he pushed it

away and focused on the cats before him.

"I smell BatClan on this," the brown tabby said, his gaze flickering to Snowfern.

Looking worried, the she-cat took in the scent rather deeply, then drew back with her ears flattened. "Something must be wrong..." she breathed, turning her head to look over the Thunderpath.

"Why do you think that?" the gray tabby asked.

"Because BatClan is honorable," she replied calmly. "No matter what they go through, the warriors do not break the code. I'd bet ten moons of dawn patrols it was a disobedient apprentice following their stomach, or an apprentice trying to save a cat they love."

"Are they really in that bad of shape?" Willowpaw asked, looking scared. "They looked real skinny at the Gathering, but do they really die of starvation?"

"At least one cat every moon, without fail," Snowfern murmured, "and that's in greenleaf. With leaf-bare here, and so many kits in their nursery... I'm sure a life has been claimed already, and many more will come from it."

Rowanpaw pictured seeing Hopekit like he had seen Bramblekit, so small and weak, limp in the clearing after facing her last fight...

No.

He would not let that happen to her.

"We should get back and tell Eagleclaw," the brown tabby meowed.

"But what about the patrol?" Snowfern meowed. "We don't want them to worry about us when they need to find Acornstar."

Find Acornstar? Excitement wriggled under Rowanpaw's fur. That was the second time they had mentioned the strange EchoClan leader. Had she disappeared? Rowanpaw wanted to race home immediately. If a patrol was going after her, that would make EchoClan much weaker than before, with no true leadership or as

many warriors. Maybe instead of begging for help, they could take what they needed by force!

"We'll wait 'til they leave to tell Eagleclaw--good find, Willowpaw," the brown tabby meowed. The little apprentice seemed glad to have the praise, and after burying the mouse remains the tom led them off. Rowanpaw waited for a little while after they left, then hurried away from the herbs and went for his territory, knowing that prey could wait. He paused at the edge, looking out over the path to make sure he couldn't see any of his Clanmates before running across, diving into dry, prickly bushes of his territory. They scraped at his skin and he forced himself out as quick as he could.

Instantly, he found himself facing Aspenheart. Her gray fur was bristling, and her amber eyes glowed with anger. Rowanpaw instantly felt a strong surge of hatred at the sight of her. "What are you doing here?" he growled. Had she actually *followed* him?

"I should be asking you the same thing!" Aspenheart hissed, tail lashing. "You were in EchoClan territory!"

"And?"

She seemed surprised by his response. "That's breaking the warrior code!" she growled, as if he was mouse-brained enough to not realize that.

"Well, I must have learned that from you," he retorted carelessly.

"How dare you!" Her claws dug through the snow. "You have no idea why I did what I did, so you can't judge me!"

"All that I know is that you left! You abandoned your Clan and your family when they needed you!" Red was taking over Rowanpaw's vision, and all he could see was Emberheart's limp, bloody body. Somehow, someway, he knew it was Aspenheart's fault. Because *everything* was her fault.

Sadness glowed in Aspenheart's gaze. "I'm sorry, Ratpaw, I truly am..."

"That's not my name!" he hissed, fur bristling and claws

unsheathing. "My name is Rowanpaw!"

"No, it's not!" she yowled, her voice becoming hoarse in anger. "Your name is Ratpaw, and you will never get away from that!"

"Why are so adamant about such an awful name?" he hissed. "Will you just finally accept I will never take that name?"

Aspenheart seemed to deflate, sadness taking over the anger. "Ratpaw, do you know where your name came from?" she asked softly.

"Your first catch?" he growled carelessly, rolling his eyes and lashing his tail.

"My father," she responded quietly, and he snorted. "His name was Ratdust, and he was the bravest and most loyal warrior I have ever known."

"Well, I bet he's quite disappointed then, having only you to carry on his blood. I bet he was glad when you left."

"He died when I was apprentice," Aspenheart responded quietly.

"Yeah, he was probably desperate to get away."

"Shut up!" the she-cat burst out. "You are so insolent! I'm glad Emberheart is dead--at least she doesn't have to see what you've become!"

Something snapped inside Rowanpaw, and he barely even recognized the feeling of crouching and pushing off from the ground. Aspenheart was so shocked she didn't even move, and his claws dug deep into her chest, forcing her backward. "Don't you *dare* mention her name!" He tried to snap at her neck, but she managed to jut her head back just in time. He felt her back paws on his stomach, and he was thrown backward.

He hit the snow hard, sending a sharp pain through his side. His vision became blurry, but he forced it away and struggled to his paws, wobbling back and forth.

"Ratpaw, I'm so sorry--are you okay?" Aspenheart tried to approach him, but he cleared his head with a quick shake and leaped for her again. She avoided him, leaping swiftly to the side before turning back to him. "Please! Just listen!"

"Useless!" he hissed, trying to slash at her face. She jumped back, but he saw the ends of a few of her whiskers flutter down to the snowy ground. "You're completely useless!" He leaped again, but he was expecting her leap away and the moment he landed he turned and jumped again. She didn't have the time to avoid him and he slammed into her side.

She collapsed into the snow, struggling to get free. But he was determined to hold her down, pinning her to her back and digging his claws into her stomach. She screeched in pain as he sliced down, feeling her blood clot his claws. Her eyes were full of fear, and it sent a warm shiver of satisfaction through his body.

Suddenly, harsh fangs dug deep into his neck, and he was violently thrown away. He landed heavily against a tree, feeling a horrible pain race up his spine, burning like fire that flooded his veins. At first everything was silent and disorienting, but then he saw a faint orange shape approaching him, and the horrible stench of fox came to his nose.

He tried to move his legs, but he was still aching everywhere. The fox was coming closer, snarling and drooling, eyes full of blazing excitement. Rowanpaw's vision started to clear, and he saw Aspenheart struggling to her paws. She looked bloody and unsteady, blood dribbling from her muzzle, but she was staring right at him. Rowanpaw felt a desperation rise inside of him, despite all his hate and anger. All the frustration and loathing he had felt for the she-cat for all those moons melted away, and he suddenly felt like a little kit again, staying up every night to watch the camp entrance, waiting for her to suddenly appear. He remembered when Emberheart had risked her life to save him, when he had been hoping for his mother to appear.

And now she had the chance to finally prove herself, to show that she was more than he thought she was. All she had to do was attack, to distract the creature for just a moment so he could gather

his strength.

But then she took a step back. And another. Her eyes betrayed no regret as she continued to back away until she spotted a clump of brambles, then she raced to disappear into its depths, watching him with a deep amber gaze.

She was completely content to wait there and watch him die...

Sharp, dirty fangs dug deep into the side of Rowanpaw's neck, and he felt his own blood well into his throat. He wiggled and fought and slashed at the fox's face, but it just attached itself more fiercely. Once again, the apprentice saw Aspenheart, her guarded look of sadness and cowardice.

Useless.

He lashed out blindly at the fox, and his claws hit something soft and small that made the fox screech in pain, letting go of him and scramble back. He was dragged with, and he realized he had managed to get his claws stuck in the fox's eye. He tugged back as fierce as he could, his claws scratching down the fox's muzzle until he was free.

The pain in his legs was awful, but he struggled to his paws, gasping and choking on the blood that was clogging his throat. The fox snarled briefly, then turned and raced away, crashing through the same bush Aspenheart was crouched in. It tripped over the cowering she-cat, and blindingly lashed at her before scrambling up and racing away, crying and yelping.

Aspenheart scrambled away, now bleeding from her muzzle where the fox had caught her. She attempted to clean it, leaning her muzzle close to the ground to get at it with her paw. Rowanpaw stalked toward her, feeling harsh agony at every step rush through his spine and fierce flares of pain in his neck as he pulled his lips into a snarl.

The she-cat raised her head, began to open her mouth to speak. She had barely got out the false name of "Ratpaw" before he raised his claws and sliced them deep into her throat.

For a moment she still stood, choking and gagging with eyes wide with shock. Then her legs crumbled, and she collapsed. Rowanpaw stared down at her with a hard expression. He felt no regret nor grief, and watched as the final bit of life faded from Aspenheart's twitching body.

He heard fast pawsteps, and slowly turned his head so he could watch as Dawnstar appeared, quickly followed by Brownear and Juniperfur. "Great StarClan!" the leader breathed. "What happened? We heard a fox, but..." Her eyes fell on Rowanpaw's bloody paw, Aspenheart's skin and fur still stuck in his claws. "Ratpaw, what did you do...?"

He knew he could've come up with some type of lie, but he didn't really care. He was hurting and tired and just wanted to get back to Hopekit--so he simply stared Dawnstar straight in the eye and replied honestly, "I killed Aspenheart."

It seemed even Dawnstar didn't expect such a straight answer, and she was speechless for a few moments. Then, finally, she murmured, "why?"

He felt no shame in his actions, despite her terrified and shocked eyes, and the fact that both Brownear and Juniperfur had taken a few steps back, their fur bristling and their claws unsheathed. "Does it matter?" he asked softly. "No matter what I say, even if I told you that I was about to die and she did nothing, it wouldn't matter, because I still killed her when she wasn't fighting back."

He licked his paw once, not even minding the harsh taste of his mother's blood, and added, "I'll head back to camp and wait for your punishment." He walked past her without another word, and she didn't say anything either, at least not to him.

"Brownear, uh, go with him. Make sure... Just, have him sit at the camp entrance and not talk to anyone..."

Rowanpaw heard the tom following him, but neither tried to speak. The apprentice padded silently through the snowy marsh, with each step more and more painful. He could feel the blood pouring from his neck, soaking his chest and legs and leaving a heavy trail of

blood behind him. He recalled his brief weakness, and suddenly hated himself for that, in what he believed might've been the last moments of his life, he had begged for his mother to help him.

No. She's not my mother. She was just a useless traitor, and she deserved to die. She had deserved to die many, many moons ago, and it was unfortunate for it to only happen now.

After a journey that seemed much longer than normal, Rowanpaw made to the entrance of camp. The jumps of the rocks seemed to stretch far in front of him, but he was determined to show strength in front of Brownear. Each leap was more painful than the last, and when he finally pulled himself up the last ledge he swayed to and fro, his vision briefly blurring. He heard claws scraping against rock, and Blazepaw was by his side in an instant.

"Ro--Ratpaw! Are you okay? What happened?" He tucked himself against his brother's side, and Rowanpaw let his weight rest on him, feeling like he was going to collapse. "Is that fox I smell?"

Brownear pulled himself up after a moment, shaking his fur. "Blazepaw, help your brother down the rocks, then go get Sandflight."

Looking a little hesitant at the warrior's harsh tone, Blazepaw helped Rowanpaw stumble down the rocks, waiting until the injured cat had settled into a crouch before racing across the clearing. Since it was still quite early in the day, most the Clan was still in camp, and was drawn from the warmth of their dens to find the stench of blood.

When Frondpaw and Carppaw emerged from the log den, they both looked over. Carppaw looked worried, and shifted on his paws like he was going to come over, but Frondpaw nudged his shoulder and led the brown tom to where Bloomcloud was quietly emerging from the warriors' den on unsteady paws, blinking her weak, sleepy eyes.

Brownear sat a little away from Rowanpaw, casting the apprentice uneasy glances. He gave a very weak purr as Leafpelt approaching, curling herself around him and sniffing his head. "Are you okay? What happened?" Her eyes flashed briefly to Rowanpaw. The

apprentice looked at her coldly, then just stared across the clearing to the nursery. No cat had appeared from there, and he just wanted to race over and check on Hopekit.

"I... Don't know," Brownear finally responded to his mate, though he didn't say anything else. He did seem glad that Sandflight and Blazepaw appeared from their den, hurrying over to Rowanpaw. The medicine cat had herbs filling her jaws, and dropped them beside the injured apprentice. She brought her nose close to his neck, sniffing the wounds dug deep into his skin. Her breath made him wince in pain as it slid against his broken flesh.

"What happened?" she meowed, leaning down to grab some of her herbs.

"I got attacked by a fox," he growled, shifting where he lay and causing a pain through his back. He growled swiftly.

Sandflight noticed, and sniffed his spine while chewing. "What happened to your back?" her mew was slightly muffled.

"It flung me against a tree," he muttered, hating how weak it made him sound.

"So it bit you twice?" she asked, beginning to lick the wounds into his neck. He hissed in pain, clawing the stone under him. She ignored his rather constant grunts of pain.

"So, what happened? Why were you out of camp?" Blazepaw asked.

Rowanpaw didn't plan on answering his brother, but Brownear didn't even give him the chance. "Be quiet, Blazepaw."

The apprentice looked at him, then lowered his gaze to the ground. But then it raised again when he heard cats crawling up the camp entrance, and Rowanpaw slowly turned his head to see Dawnstar and Juniperfur dragging Aspenheart's limp body up the camp entrance. The Clan stared in silent shock as the leader pulled the cat down the rocks and into the clearing. She stepped away, breathing heavy after having her mouth full of fur.

"Aspenheart..." Hawktail pushed his way through the warriors, eyes

full of grief. With a quiet mew, he slunk up to the she-cat's side, nudging her cheek. Then his brown gaze turned to Dawnstar, twisting with anger. "What happened?"

Dawnstar blinked at him, then walked over to the pathway out of camp and jumped up, turning to face her Clan. "Let all my Clanmates listen to what I need to say!" she called, a little louder than she needed too. By now, all the warriors had come from their den, but Dawnstar was looking to the nursery when she spoke. Rowanpaw heard quiet voices from inside, sounding like his sisters. Then Ashbreeze appeared, looking anxiously back inside the den. She looked forward, and her eyes fell on Aspenheart in surprise. "Go back to your kits," Dawnstar decided softly. "Keep everyone in the nursery--a warrior will come in soon and let you know what happened."

Looking thankful but still surprised at the dead she-cat, Ashbreeze backed inside the den.

Dawnstar looked after her for a moment, then looked at her Clan. After a few heartbeats, she meowed, "as you all can see, Aspenheart is... gone."

"That's obvious enough!" Hawktail scratched his claws over the stone, standing above Aspenheart's bloody body. "I want to know who did it!"

"Was it not a fox?" Hazelfur asked, peering at the she-cat. Next to her, Birchsplash was staring at his paws, wide-eyed and fur on end.

"You ever see a fox make such small clawmarks?" Hawktail hissed. "No way! She was killed by a cat! So I want to know who did it."

But already, many faces were turning to Rowanpaw. After all, he had come in bloody and silent, sitting at the edge of the clearing like a prisoner.

It seemed Dawnstar didn't exactly know how to break the news, so went with Rowanpaw's way, straight to the point--"Ratpaw killed her."

Her mew was met by silence, and Birchsplash raised his head, eyes full of shock. He had his mouth open, as if he was going to say something, but he was silent. Sandflight took a few steps away, and Leafpelt pressed herself closer to Brownear. Hawktail met Rowanpaw's careless gaze. "Why?" he whispered, so quiet it was almost hard to hear him. "I know you hated her... but why? What could ever make you kill your own mother?"

"She wasn't my mother," Rowanpaw hissed, lashing his tail. "I was being attacked by a fox and she hid--waited for me to die; that's not something a mother would do. A true parent would do anything they could to save their kit."

"That doesn't change the fact you murdered her!" Hawktail growled, fur bristling and teeth flashing.

"And it doesn't change the fact I would've killed her even if the fox *hadn't* attacked!" Rowanpaw retorted. Many cats gasped in shock, and he was actively aware of not only Sandflight taking another step away, but Blazepaw, too. It sent a claw of pang deep in his heart, but he forced himself to ignore it. "She deserved to die, and I'm glad I was the one to do it!"

Hawktail looked ready to attack, but Hickoryclaw appeared by his side, pressing against him and whispering into his ear. Rowanpaw could not hear what the black tom was saying, but it was enough to get Hawktail to lower his head and step backward. Then Hickoryclaw met Rowanpaw's gaze, and he saw something he didn't expect--understanding. It was obvious on his face, and he even gave the young tom a tiny nod and a slow blink of his yellow gaze.

"A decision must be made," Dawnstar meowed softly. "And I will not make it alone--this must be a decision made by the Clan on what to do..." the leader trailed off, as if she hoped one of her warriors would speak up.

And one did.

"I say we banish him."

Rowanpaw felt a surprisingly strong pain of sadness. Not because of

what was said, but because of who said it. Birchsplash's eyes were hard and serious, and showed no remorse for the apprentice. A thought weaved its way into Rowanpaw's mind--had Birchsplash only liked him because he was Aspenheart's son? Or was it because he was Emberheart's apprentice? Either way, both she-cats were gone, and now Birchsplash stared at Rowanpaw with the same look the apprentice constantly gave his mother, a look of hatred and betrayal.

"He couldn't leave while injured like this," Sandflight meowed, speaking quite softly. "He could die easily. If we were to actually banish him, he would have to stay with us until he is healed enough to travel."

Rowanpaw felt his fur bristling. They were speaking as if he wasn't there! It angered him quite a bit, but he didn't have anything else to say. By now, he truly didn't care if they told him to leave or not. More than anything, he just wanted to sleep so he could see Emberheart again.

"Nothing has been decided," Dawnstar meowed. "And we will not decide Ratpaw's future in one day. For now, we will mourn Aspenheart, and choose Ratpaw's fate after he has healed."

"I don't want to share a den with him!" Frondpaw spoke up, her tail lashing. Carppaw murmured something fiercely in her ear.

"I don't even want to share a camp with him," Leafpelt admitted quietly to Brownear. The tom gave a tiny nod of understanding, pressing closer to his mate. Rowanpaw turned his head away from them, and instead focused on his brother. He looked absolutely terrified, and moved forward to press himself against Rowanpaw's fur.

"I don't know why you did it," he whispered softly, "but I won't turn against you, no matter what."

Rowanpaw just sent a bleak glance at his brother, then turned back to look at Dawnstar. "--keep him in the apprentices' log, with a guard day and night. The apprentices will sleep in the warriors' den, at least until we figure something out. Brackenfoot, you take first

watch. No visitors." She looked down to Rowanpaw, a deep look in her guarded gaze. "Rest for now. I will visit you tomorrow to see how you are fairing, and we can talk more about what happened."

"There's nothing left to say," he growled, struggling up to his paws and stalking for his den. The crowd of cats shifted away, watching him go. He felt the burning hatred from Birchsplash's gaze burning into his coat, but he ignored everything and went to his nest, curling up in the dry, scratchy bracken. He let his eyes closed, and just thought of Emberheart.

I'm sorry for the very late chapter, I was having a hard time writing this one, I guess because I wanted it perfect, though I don't think it is. I know it could be better, but I'm proud of it. I hope you guys enjoyed!

Question #1: What are your thoughts about Aspenheart's death? Do you think she deserved it?

Question #2: Do you think Rowanpaw will be exiled, or allowed to stay?

Question #3: Do you think killing Aspenheart was good for Rowanpaw or bad for him? (in terms of his future)

Chapter Thirteen

It didn't take long for the patrol to find where Acornstar had stayed after leaving EchoClan--right where the mountain curved away from the Old Thunderpath a large oak tree stood, with a small den under the roots where Frostfall detected a faint scent and Silverstrike found some amber-colored fur stuck on some thorns nearby.

"Seems like she stayed here for a few days," Frostfall commented, "probably uncertain where to go. If we had checked outside the territory right away we probably would've found her."

"So we're not far behind, right?" Jaypaw asked excitedly. He felt a strong shiver of anticipation at exploring farther, but had a worm of fear in his heart of the unknown--he pushed it away, focusing on what was before him and that he would be well protected. *Pretty soon, I'll learn how to protective myself* and *others.* He flashed a look at Ravenpaw, who was intent on sniffing some nearby herbs. One day, he would be able to keep his brother safe, to avoid any accident like with the dog that injured Blossompaw. He imagined Ravenpaw being injured like that, and felt a surge of anxiety.

"Only by a few dawns," Silverstrike answered the apprentice. "That'll help with keeping the trail in scent, as long as nothing holds us back too much."

"Do you think we'll catch up to her soon?" Shadefur asked, sitting down and scratching behind one of his ears with a back leg.

"Probably not," Boulderclaw meowed. "She'll move faster by herself, especially since some of us are injured. We'll just have to hope she doesn't travel too far, or eventually settles somewhere for a while so we can catch up to her."

"Hopefully it doesn't take too long," Stonecoat meowed. Jaypaw had noticed that since they left camp, Stonecoat hadn't been too happy.

It was obvious he didn't really want to go on the journey, but Shadefur had dragged him along.

"We should head off, then," Silverstrike meowed. "Frostfall, can you find her trail?" The tom looked at the she-cat standing next to him.

"Probably," she said, leaning her head close to the snow and opening her jaws wide, looking intently at the ground. She wandered for a few moments before heading in a straight trail back in the direction of the Old Thunderpath. "She went this way," the she-cat reported.

"Sounds good," Silverstrike purred. "Let's head out." He and Frostfall led the way through the snowy woods, with Ravenpaw hurrying from his herbs to travel next to Jaypaw. The white and gray apprentice instantly noticed the low position of his brother's head--he always held it level with his shoulders, as if he were sulking, but Jaypaw knew it was just anxiety.

As it turned out, Acornstar's trail led right to the Thunderpath, then followed along the edge. After not long, Jaypaw noticed that Rain continued to look to the other side of the path, and his steps seemed to hesitate. Ravenpaw seemed to have noticed too, for he was quickening his pace to reach the gray tabby, but then Rain drew ahead until he was just a little behind Silverstrike.

"Silverstrike, I have a request."

Without stopping, the silver tom glanced over his shoulder. "And what would that be?" He sounded a little amused, like he was humoring the tom.

"I was hoping we could make a detour--it isn't far, and it won't take long." Jaypaw heard the desperate tone in the tom's voice, and it seemed Silverstrike did as well, for he slowed to a stop and looked back at the tom.

For a few moments he was quiet, then he finally said, "okay, lead the way--it better be close."

Jaypaw was a little surprised by how quickly the tom had agreed,

and as they followed Rain across the Thunderpath he noticed that Silverstrike's ears were down, and he was walking a little slowly. Jaypaw and Ravenpaw passed him, and the apprentice looked over to see a lost look in the tom's eyes. Obviously, something about Rain reminded him of a past only he remembered.

Rain led them straight through the forest with a determined gait. He seemed to know exactly where to go, as if he was being pulled along by a vine. Jaypaw leaned close to Ravenpaw and whispered into his ear, "do you know where we're going?" He knew his brother was smarter than him, and expected that he would know.

After a few moments his brother responded softly, "I'd guess his old den. He probably want's to visit Violet's grave."

And sure enough, after a little bit of traveling, the patrol pushed it's way into a small clearing with a gaping cave on one side and a mound of soil not far away. Without saying anything, Rain padded over to where Violet's body lay hidden and lowered his head to touch the ground, whispering something the patrol couldn't hear.

"Where are we?" Silverstrike asked no one in particular, probably not truly expecting an answer.

"His old den," Ravenpaw responded softly. "That's where his mate is buried."

Silverstrike didn't respond, and when Jaypaw looked over he saw a glaze of understanding in the tom's gaze. So the patrol stood still, waiting with surprising patience. Finally, Rain turned from the grave and silently padded back to the cats. "Thank you," he murmured softly, his eyes looking a little lost.

Silverstrike dipped his head, then turned to lead the group away. As he followed the warrior, Jaypaw noticed that his kindhearted littermate had approached Rain's side and pressed against his fur as they walked. Jaypaw was worried about his brother for this journey--he was so sweet, so caring; would he be safe away from the Clan? Could the patrol really protect him the entire time?

They traveled silently, with no reason to talk. They headed back to

the Thunderpath, where Frostfall took up the lead with her nose to the ground, sniffing close to the black path. Jaypaw was glad his paws had been hardened from the camp and the forest, so the harsh ground barely scraped at the skin.

He watched Ravenpaw's careful and soft steps, his body moving with quiet, smooth movements. His jet black fur was bushy from anxiety, and when a bird took off from a tree with an alarm call he jumped, hitting Rain's side. The tom's ears perked and he looked at the small tom, then calmed when he saw he was okay. His thick tail passed over Ravenpaw's back in a calming manner.

Jaypaw noticed a small flick of Boulderclaw's tail and a twitch of his ears. Jaypaw quickened his pace to walk next to his father, and the large tom looked down at him. He had a soft glow in his green eyes, one of love and affection. "You and your litter were born in newleaf," Boulderclaw meowed softly. "It was the most beautiful newleaf I had ever seen, coming after a rather harsh leaf-bare. Snowfern and I were so happy to have you all; the only moment that rivals it was when Stonecoat and Shadefur were born."

"We *were* pretty adorable," Shadefur meowed over his shoulder with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

Boulderclaw snorted. "With all the trouble you got into, it almost canceled out." The tom let out a small laugh. "You once annoyed Berrywhisker so much she actually managed to sit up and swipe at you! It was the most she had moved in almost a moon." Sadness briefly flared in the tom's eyes as he thought of his mother, then he shook it away. "She did love to tell you stories, though."

"I remember some," Stonecoat meowed, sounding more upbeat than Jaypaw had heard for quite a few days. "My favorites were when she talked about being an apprentice. Did you know Dovestar was her mentor? Must've been interesting, having the leader teaching her."

"Well, normally, leaders are actually doing things for their Clan," Silverstrike meowed as he traveled along. "You know, hunting and patrolling. So I'm sure Berrywhisker learned a lot--no wonder she was such an amazing cat." There was a surge of grief from the tom,

and Jaypaw felt bad for the grumpy tom. No matter how he acted, he still loved Berrywhisker with all his heart; Jaypaw couldn't even imagine losing Snowfern. He let his mind flicker back to his days in the nursery, curling up against his mother's soft side with his littermates around him.

A part of him missed those days, but then the snowy smells of the unfamiliar forest rushed around him again, filling his scent glands and sending a flare of wild adventure in his heart. How many of his Clanmates had actually been this far from camp? Not many, he was sure. Probably only this patrol, and, of course, the cat they were tracking down.

Silverstrike allowed them only a few rests as they traveled. He obviously wanted to make up some ground, and led them at a determined pace. The constant moving started giving Jaypaw shooting pains through his shoulder, and the few rests caused his stressed muscles pain each time he lay down and get up. Each break he cleaned his wounds, but they would start hurting pretty quickly again. After a while of walking, he took a quick look and saw a trail of blood leaking down his white coat, staining his shoulder and leg. Looking forward again, Jaypaw saw that Silverstrike had begun limping, too, and he noticed the lightest tint of a blood trail from his paw. And though she looked normal and steady, the cobwebs on Frostfall's haunches were turning red.

Ravenpaw had noticed, too, and slid over to Boulderclaw's side. "The patrol needs to stop so I can clean wounds," he murmured softly, ears flicking nervously.

Boulderclaw looked around at the cats, then nodded his agreement. "Silverstrike," he called, "let's rest up by that birch ahead--Ravenpaw should check all our wounds."

The pale gray and white tom cast his gaze to the sky. "We don't have long until sundown--if we stop now, we won't be able to get moving again before dark and will lose time."

"Better that then infected wounds and sore muscles," Boulderclaw told him. Silverstrike hesitated for a moment, then finally gave a nod and led the patrol over to the nearby birch tree, where Jaypaw

thankfully lowered himself down with a pained groan. Boulderclaw sat down next to him and ran the tip of his tongue over his wounds, cleaning the blood. Jaypaw sighed with relief, relaxing against the trunk.

"Shadefur, Stonecoat--go with Ravenpaw to gather some herbs. See if you can find something to eat, too," Silverstrike told the toms, getting into a sit so he could raise a paw and lick the cut there. Frostfall settled next to him, twisting around to clean her bleeding haunches. Ravenpaw hesitated for a few moments before following his older brothers, then shook himself and hurried after them. Jaypaw knew his littermate was worried about leaving the protection of the group, but he trusted the two warriors to take care of the gentle medicine cat.

"Anything I can do?" Rain asked, sitting down and curling his thick tail across his paws.

"Patrol the area," Silverstrike responded confidently. "If you see any prey bring it back--we're not hungry yet but will be pretty soon, once the herbs ware off."

Rain gave a nod before heading off, slipping through the snow bushes with only a slight sound that could've been mistaken for a drifting wind. Jaypaw recognized the sense in the silver tom's words--he currently didn't feel any pangs of hunger, but he had not eaten since before dawn, and the sky was beginning to darken orange, streaks of sunlight breaking through the bare branches and lighting up the sparkling snow.

"We'll need to find a warm place soon," Frostfall commented, fluffing out her coat with a small shake. "We'll get greencough if we stay out here much longer."

"Rain might find an old badger sett or something," Boulderclaw responded, finally leaving Jaypaw's shoulder now that it was no longer bleeding. Instead he moved to start cleaning up his own side, brushing away his thick gray fur to show the wound hidden there.

"We'll need moss, too," Frostfall added, "if we can find it."

"I'll find some later," Silverstrike sighed, briefly stretching his muscles.

"The uninjured cats will find some later, you mean," Boulderclaw responded. "You'll need to rest that paw if you want to get moving again tomorrow."

"We'll be moving anyway," the silver and white tom meowed firmly. "I just want to get Acornstar back to camp so she can make one final mistake and get kicked out of leadership. Once Eagleclaw leads, we'll be moving into a better future."

"Whether that's true or not doesn't matter," Boulderclaw told him softly, keeping his voice even. "Acornstar is our leader, and will be until StarClan orders it differently."

"Always following StarClan," Silverstrike scoffed. "Can't you ever turn your tail to them, just for a moment, to see the truth? Acornstar never belonged--ever since we were kits, she was an awful leader."

Jaypaw felt his father's fur stiffen on his flank when where he was pressed against the apprentice's side, but yet his voice was calm when he said, "she holds the lives of a leader, and shall be treated as one until her dying breath."

"How long has she been leader, though?" Silverstrike's response was cold. "Since we were young apprentices--yet how many lives has she lost? I only remember seeing her die once, *maybe* twice. You want to wait for her to lose seven more lives?"

"We don't know how many she has left, so don't assume." Boulderclaw still seemed timid, despite his brother's icy tone and harsh eyes.

"We're back!" Shadefur's voice carried to the waiting cats, and the gray tom paddered over happily. He had a clump of cobwebs on the back of his neck, while Stonecoat and Ravenpaw held bundles of herbs in their jaws. Ravenpaw set up a place near the birch tree, clearing out the snow to set his herbs down. Stonecoat added his to the pile as the black apprentice took the cobwebs off Shadefur's

coat.

"Stonecoat, Shadefur, can you go back out and try to find a den for the night? Something warm--look for some moss, too, if you could." Silverstrike's voice left no suggestion in the matter; it was a command, but a polite one.

"Well, we don't want you to pull anything, old tom," Shadefur commented, shaking his coat, "so we might as well."

"Remember I'm his littermate!" Boulderclaw called after the two young toms, whiskers twitching in amusement.

"We know!" Stonecoat mewled over his shoulder with a surprisingly happy tone, and his tail waved happily through the air.

"Sometimes I think Ravenpaw is more mature than they are," Boulderclaw muttered with a roll of his eyes. The medicine cat apprentice lowered his head in embarrassment, briefly licking his chest. Then he shook himself, cleaned his paw with his tongue quite thoroughly, then grabbed some bushy green leaves and yellow-budded stalks and headed to Jaypaw's side.

Ravenpaw focused on taking a few of each herb in his jaws and beginning to chew, using his paw to softly brush Jaypaw's thick coat out of the way of the wound on his shoulder. Rain returned soon enough, a large ball of moss in his jaws. He set it down near the group with a respectful nod to Silverstrike, then padded away to find a soft patch of snow that he crouched down in, paws tucked close too his chest and tail curled around his side.

"This almost reminds me of my apprenticeship," Silverstrike meowed after a few moments of silence. "My mentor, Reedshadow, took me out of the territory to track a fox, make sure it was leaving the territory."

"I remember that," Frostfall said softly, as Ravenpaw began to lick the herbs into Jaypaw's shoulder. He winched briefly, then calmed as the sharp pain began to subside. "That wasn't long before Dovestar died."

Silverstrike nodded sadly. "And the beginning of the fall for EchoClan," he sighed.

"Enough, Silverstrike," Boulderclaw meowed softly. The silver tom snorted but left the subject.

"Reedshadow was the son of Branchstar's daughter, you know," Silverstrike added to the apprentices.

"Now that was a great leader," Frostfall purred in amusement. "Countless stories about him."

"He did take down the cat that threatened all the Clans," Silverstrike pointed out.

Jaypaw heard shifting of snow, and looked over to see his father's coat was beginning to stiffen, and his tail flicked softly. Yet his eyes remained calm and quiet.

"I'm sorry, but may I ask who you're talking about?" Rain questioned softly.

"Branchstar was leader before Dovestar, who was leader before Acornstar," Silverstrike responded with a surprisingly sincere tone, though still with his usual coarse voice. "Before Branchstar was Brookstar, a murderous traitor. She killed many cats to get her position, from warriors, to the previous leader, even her own newborn kits. She also killed two medicine cats because she thought they might favor another Clan. She was a tyrant, but Branchstar exposed her and brought EchoClan out of the darkness she put us in."

Rain was quiet for a few moments. "I knew a cat like that once," he murmured.

Jaypaw wondered if he was speaking of MothClan's leader, and decided he was.

"Did that cat get what they deserved?" Silverstrike asked.

"Not as far as I know," Rain sighed, "but I hope she does soon."

"No need to worry about that anymore," Silverstrike decided, getting up and stretching out his limbs. "One day, she'll be a distant memory, just like Brookstar is."

Ravenpaw finally finished with Jaypaw's shoulder, and after covering it with some cobwebs he padded over to Frostfall to work on her neck. Feeling relaxed, Jaypaw let out a soft yawn, looking over at his father. Worry briefly wormed through his heart as he saw a disturbed look on his father's face, and the way his claws were unsheathed, scratching over the frozen earth now revealed from the melted snow.

Perhaps he was starting to figure Rain was more than just some rogue.

I don't really have much to say about my long break, nothing more than I'm sorry. I was having a strangely hard time writing this chapter, despite my strong excitement for the next few ones to come, which will hopefully be uploaded soon but I can't be sure. I think that from now on I'm going to try a little harder on working on these chapters, even if I have to tough it out. But I'll still put passion into them, and make sure I'm happy with them. I also don't know if I'll have a scheduled date for when each chapter comes out in the future-- I think from now on it'll be "It's finished, I'm updating". Maybe that will help, maybe it won't. I just hope I can quicken up on writing this because I have so much of this story planned out, at this rate it'll take years to get to where I really, really want to be. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed a little. No questions, but comment what you thought if you want.

Chapter Fourteen

"Attack!" Primkit leaped onto Rowanpaw's back, digging her small claws into his fur, tail flicking through the air.

Rowanpaw purred with amusement, feeling Meadowkit barrel into his side while Fernkit battered at his tail. With a groan of fake pain, the apprentice collapsed onto the ground, feeling their forms press down on him. They were getting quite big, and it was getting harder and harder to play with them like this.

"Oh, get off him, you little foxes!" Emberheart laughed. "You'll squash him!" At her belly, Hopekit raised an unsteady head, blinking her eyes. They were barely opened and shone dark blue. Rowanpaw had a feeling that one day they would turn a glowing yellow like her mother.

With squeals of happiness, the kits scurried away to the their nest, with Primkit tackling Meadowkit into the soft ferns. Rowanpaw got to his paws, shaking dust from his coat. Then he padded softly to Emberheart's side, taking in her soft, sweet scent. It seemed slightly fainter than he was used to, as if it were a distant memory. He took many moments to keep the smell in his scent glands.

"What are you doing?" Emberheart asked with a purr.

"Remembering you," he said before he could stop himself.

"Well, I'm right here," she laughed. "You don't have to remember me."

"I always have to remember you," he answered blindly, a little harsher than he intended.

Emberheart rolled her eyes. "If you insist, silly kit." She leaned down to lick Hopekit's fur, a new purr rising in her throat once again.

"She'll be a great warrior one day," Rowanpaw murmured softly. "Maybe my own apprentice?" he added hopefully.

Emberheart snorted. "You know you'll be too young. When she's six

moons, you'll have been a warrior for what, two moons? You'll need much more experience than that."

"Alright, alright," he sighed, settling down next to her nest, feeling the soft touch of her fur. "As long as I'm there."

"Perhaps Hopekit can get you to enjoy the territory a little more." She nudged his cheek softly.

"Maybe," he agreed. "As long as we all make it to see that day." The instant he said the words, he regretted them, because he knew what was going to happen.

A dark light took over Emberheart's expression, one of sadness and loss. "It's already too late for that," she whispered.

"No, please, it's not." He didn't want it to happen again--as long as he went with the dream, it would be real. The moment he mentioned his horrible waking moments it would flood back, the pain and realization that this wasn't real, just an illusion in his head. But why couldn't it be real? Why couldn't this be reality, and the true nightmares only appear when he slept? Pain began to seep into his neck, and he felt Emberheart's blood began to fill the nest, her eyes getting weaker, her body getting thinner.

"Soon you'll be alone," Emberheart whispered to him. "Soon Hopekit will join me."

"No!" he cried, desperately taking in her scent, pressing closer to her fur. "Please, just come back to me. Just give me one more chance..."

"You've had plenty of chances," Emberheart whispered. "Yet you failed, and you lost everything. You've lied and you've stole and you've killed--why would you ever deserve any bit of happiness after all you've done?"

Rowanpaw hid his face under her chin, tucked into her fur. He felt a void open in his chest, making him feel so small and empty and alone. "I'm sorry," he murmured into her soft fur. "I'm so sorry."

He woke slowly, feeling the dry, dying bracken under his fur. There was a harsh ache in his neck, and a heavy rumbling in his belly that made him feel sick. He shifted, grunting in pain. He was facing

toward the entrance of the small log den, and saw the guarding figure of Hickoryclaw. The tom looked back at the noise of his waking, and meowed coolly, "you're awake."

Rowanpaw tried to move again, and groaned in displeasure. Hickoryclaw got to his paws, looked briefly around the clearing, then slipped into the den, having to lower himself slightly to fit within the small log. "What do you want?" Rowanpaw growled, not in the mood for whatever Hickoryclaw was going to say.

The tom's eyes narrowed at Rowanpaw's cold mew. "I wanted to know why you did it," he said finally.

"Did what? Kill Aspenheart?"

"Yes." Hickoryclaw's eyes were hard and cold.

Rowanpaw tried to sit up, but stopped himself quickly. He didn't want to answer the tom's question, so instead he asked, "what did you say to Hawktail? And why did you nod to me?"

Hickoryclaw narrowed his eyes, but then meowed, "I told him that he should not dishonor Aspenheart by picking a fight. And I nodded to you because you were right to kill her."

Rowanpaw was surprised, and paid acute attention. "Why?"

"I'm pretty sure I asked that first," Hickoryclaw sighed, but checked out of the log for a moment before looking back at the apprentice and saying, "I've known Aspenheart ever since she first met Hawktail, back when he was Rohan living in the Twolegplace. She was self-centered even back then, wanting everything but giving nothing. I don't know why Hawktail liked her, when there was plenty of kind she-cats who liked him for his bravery and confidence. She only came for a few days every few moons, but Hawktail waited anxiously for every moment.

"When she was expecting you and your littermates, Hawktail was so unbelievably happy, but Aspenheart changed. She told Hawktail she didn't want kits, she was scared they'd starve in BatClan. Hawktail begged her to live with us, to join us in the garden, but she said she

could never leave BatClan forever, and her Clanmates wouldn't let her leave now that she would have kits. She left, and we didn't see her for about four and a half moons. When we found her, half dead, she was curled around the body of her daughter--your sister, Lavenderkit. Hawktail was completely broken, and it was because of her. He was my friend, but he was never the same after he met her.

"You're a good cat, Rowanpaw, living in the wrong world. Under different situations you could be an amazing warrior, but the trauma of your past haunts you...as mine does to me."

Rowanpaw narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

"We used to have a lot more cats at the garden," Hickoryclaw explained softly, "just as many as you have in your Clan, maybe even more. We were strong, working well together. We kept the foxes fed and away from the garden. I was young when I joined, barely older than you are now; I had lost my parents and brother to thirst, and was almost dead myself when Hawktail found me, brought me to the garden. He became my new brother, and his family my family. It was good for a long time, and we both had turned into fine hunters and protectors of the mothers, kits, and elders. Then our leader died, and a new cat was voted--and their first decision was to stop giving to the foxes. It was okay for a moon or so, we were eating well and our kits were strong. But soon the foxes got angry, got hungry. They attacked in the night when we were sleeping, when we thought we were safe. Many cats were slaughtered, including Hawktail's family. After, our numbers got smaller and smaller, until it was just the cats you and your friends found."

Rowanpaw let out a soft breath, winching from the pain in his neck. "Why should I care?" he growled. "I didn't know them, so their deaths don't affect me."

Hickoryclaw's eyes darkened. "Many of those cats were your kin."

"No, they weren't. Not as far as I'm concerned. The only kin I have is Blazepaw, Sparkkit, Emberheart, and Hopekit. No one else. Now leave me alone." He shifted his head to look away from the tom,

letting out a soft breath from his nostrils.

Hickoryclaw snorted. "Fine, wallow in your self-pity until you drown in it." Hickoryclaw got up, turned around, and slunk out of the den, settling back into a sit with a straight back. For a tiny moment, Rowanpaw was a little disappointed, then he shook it away with a flick of his ear and focused on the peeling bark of the tree.

"Hickoryclaw, go and rest in the warriors' den please. Thank you for volenteering." Rowanpaw recognized Dawnstar's voice, but had no interest in talking to her, so he didn't move his head. He heard Hickoryclaw leaving, and Dawnstar slipped into the den, forced into a slight crouch. "I forgot how small this place is," she murmured. "Haven't been in here for, well, I don't know how long. Many, many moons."

Rowanpaw didn't know if she was talking to him or not, but he didn't plan on answering anyway.

"I'm here to talk about your punishment, Ratpaw," she meowed.

"That's not my name." He hated just the sound of it, the thought of it.

"Excuse me?" Dawnstar was obviously surprised.

"My name isn't Ratpaw, it's Rowanpaw," he murmured, still not even looking at her.

"And why do you think that?" She spoke slowly, obviously trying to not infuriate him.

"It's not what I think, it's what I know. Who I am." Would no one understand? Would Emberheart and Blazepaw be the only ones to realize how important this truly was to him?

"Who are you is Ratpaw--it's the name you were born with."

"Techincally, I was born 'Rat*kit*'," he corrected coldly.

"My point stands." She shifted, wrapping her tail around her paws

with a soft twitch of her whiskers.

"And so does mine--I hate being called Ratpaw, and I won't stand it anymore." He watched her gaze for a glimpse of any emotion, but it seemed she had trained herself to reveal nothing if she wanted--she sat with a blank face, looking calm and undeterred.

"Your name does not define you--you are not a rat, not in any way. You are not named for the creature but for another cat of your Clan--"

"Yeah, yeah, Ratdust," he growled dismissively, lashing his tail. "Aspenheart told me about him, just before I killed her. How about we move onto that because I'm kind've getting tired here, and I'd rather sleep."

Dawnstar's look did not change. "Did she tell you he was Hawkstar's deputy before me?"

He hadn't heard much of the previous leader, and wasn't in the mood to think about it too hard, because everything he had learned about BatClan's past had been from Emberheart, so he didn't answer the she-cat. She seemed to take his silence for acceptance to go on.

"He was made leader very young, the youngest leader in any Clan, but yet he was amazing. He always knew what to do, when to do it--he never faultered. He was brave and quick-witted and a wonderful father, too. His daughter, Robinstrike, was just like him, always trying to help others. She was my son's mate..."

Rowanpaw was faintly surprised. He had never heard of Dawnstar having kits before, but reminded himself that she did have a mate until roughly seven moons ago, so it would've been strange for a she-cat of her age, even with leadership, to have not had at least one litter.

"They both left on the patrol that I sent out, and I never saw them again... I sent my own son, my own mate, and the daughter of the tom I trusted the most to their deaths. And it will always be with me that I could've saved them." There was a dark, sad look in Dawnstar's gaze. "Sandflight is the only family I have left." Her cold

eyes locked onto his. "Every cat in this Clan has lost those they love, but they continue on because it's their job, because they want to survive. Every moment you spend wallowing in your self-pity drags the Clan farther down. So I am going to ask you one question, and you will answer yes or no--can you give yourself completely to this Clan, and protect any and all Clanmates despite personal feelings?"

Despite the pain that flared through his neck, he forced himself to sit up, grunting in pain. He stared down the leader with determination, and without a single doubt in his mind he answered, "no."

There was obvious disappointment in Dawnstar's eyes. "Then I have no choice," she said softly. "Ratpaw, you are banished from BatClan. In three days you will escorted from the territory, and if you ever return you will be treated as a rogue."

"So I'll be accepted instantly as a warrior?" he taunted softly.

Dawnstar did not take the bait. "You stay in this den under guard until it is time to leave. No visitors." She stood and slipped from the den, then she added softly over her shoulder, "If you had come to me about your name, I would've allowed you to change it; but remember that a different name doesn't change who you are on the inside."

Rowanpaw watched her leave and Hickoryclaw settle down again, casting a brief glance inside at him. Rowanpaw ignored it, and spread out on the rough nest once again. He didn't feel shocked at the idea of exile, and wasn't completely sure if he cared or not that he was leaving the Clan. He would miss Hopekit and Blazepaw, but he hated how constricting the Clan was--perhaps he would enjoy being outside the Clan, where he could take care of himself and spend as much time dreaming about Emberheart as he wanted. Or perhaps that fox would find him again, take him out of this world and let him be with Emberheart as long as he wanted. Or there would just be a thick, black nothingness, and he would be free of the pain.

Either way, he didn't care. He was wasting away, and tired of dealing with his rat-brained Clanmates that couldn't see past their

own noses. He cast a tired gaze out into the clearing. What would Blazepaw think? Would he be disappointed? Angry? Happy? And what of his sisters? He knew Primkit hated Aspenheart as much as he did, but would she, Meadowkit, and Fernkit still feel the same even if they realized she was dead, killed by the brother they trusted more than anything?

With a sigh, he closed his eyes. There was nothing he could do about it anymore, except to see Emberheart once more while still inside the Clan.

Chapter Fifteen

By the time two dawns past, Rowanpaw's wound had begun healing quite well, and he could sit up if he wanted. But he had no real reason too. Dawnstar had been truthful about not letting any cat see him, with his only visitor being when Sandflight came to check his wounds or the guard gave him a half-frozen, starved piece of prey barely big enough for two bites.

He looked out at the clearing with a blank look, seeing Leafpelt lead Carppaw, Juniperfur, and Blazepaw on a hunting patrol. Rowanpaw saw his brother look over briefly, a sad look in his gaze as he quietly followed the other cats. The apprentice felt his depression flame, knowing he would never again travel side-by-side with his brother. Would he even see his brother after he left the Clan?

The day was already almost over, with the cave darkening slowly, a pale orange gleam of sunlight glancing into camp. Rowanpaw was tired, but unable to sleep. He had spent almost the entire time of his isolation visiting with Emberheart, sometimes managing to drift awake after a peaceful conversation and other times jerked away because he said something wrong.

But he was also scared to sleep, because once he did he would wake to the moment he would have to leave. Next time he woke up, he would be leaving BatClan camp for the last time.

A shadow cast over his face, a figure blocking the rising sunlight. After a few moments of blinking tiredly, Rowanpaw realized the figure there was Dawnstar. "How are you today, Ratpaw?" she asked quietly.

He didn't answer, simply turning his head away, feeling a dull ache in his neck.

Dawnstar slipped into the log, getting into a slouched sit with her tail neatly curling aroud her paws. "Is your neck healing well?"

He instantly understood. She just wanted to make sure he could leave on time. "I'm fine," he growled.

"No pain?"

"No," he lied.

Dawnstar was quiet for a moment. "Tomorrow at sunrise, you will be escorted from the territory. That should give you plenty of time to find a den and get settled in safely."

"'Safely'?" he growled. "There's nothing safe about being alone. Everyone knows that. You're sending me to a death sentence." He remembered that poor mother cat he and Birchsplash had found. *Violet,* he thought faintly, *where was your mate? Why didn't he protect you?* He wondered how her kits were doing, in EchoClan. Did the cats accept them as their own?

And suddenly, he remembered. *MothClan.* He had forgotten about what she had said, speaking faintly of a hidden Clan. For a moment, Rowanpaw wondered if he should tell Dawnstar, but he decided against it, and instead decided to spill a different secret. "Acornstar has left EchoClan."

"What?" Dawnstar's ears drew back. "What do you mean she left EchoClan? How would you even know?"

"I was hunting in EchoClan territory," he answered blankly, knowing there was nothing else she could do about his misdeeds against the Clan. "Before I killed Aspenheart."

Dawnstar's fur began to bristle slightly, but then she took a quiet breath and forced it down again. "You could risk the peace between the Clans," she told him. "What if EchoClan finds out, and decides to attack, or bring it up at the Gathering? Do you think SageClan and CrowClan will consider giving us territory if they think we are thieves?"

"Well, it's not my problem anymore, is it?" he growled.

"It will always be your problem, your family is here--do you want them to starve?" When he didn't answer, the leader let out a soft

sigh, her eyes still rather hard. "I'm guessing you overheard a patrol?" the she-cat murmured.

"They said Acornstar had disappeared and they were sending a patrol after her. I'd guess they're pretty weak right now, maybe weaker than us." He watched her for a change in her eyes, but they stayed calm and cold.

"We cannot risk the injuries, even if it's possible to win. We have a better chance--"

"Bowing down and acting like mice, begging for help?" he taunted.

"Being strong enough to know that we need help," was her simple response. Then she stood, slipped from the den, and did not look back.

Rowanpaw slouched down farther, resting his chin on the dirty, dry moss. He almost wanted her to come back, just so he could have someone to talk to. He pictured tomorrow, being walked across the clearing, all his Clan watching him, judging him... He wouldn't do it. He tucked himself deeper into the moss, wanting to see Emberheart more than ever--*needing* to see her.

He forced himself to calm, focusing a slow, quiet thought of the she-cat. He pictured curling up by her side, feeling her warm fur... For a some time he was in silence, breathing deeply, until he finally felt his mind slip away.

"Welcome back, Rowanpaw. Good hunting?"

Rowanpaw had a warm vole in his jaws, the sweet blood flooding his throat. He dropped it next to Emberheart's nest, rubbing his head under his chin, letting out a loud, happy purr. Emberheart returned the sound, giving his ear a soft lick when he pulled away. "How's Hopekit?" He looked down at the tiny kit, her wiggling form moving closer to Emberheart's thick belly fur.

"She's absolutely wonderful," the mother sighed, leaning down to give her daughter a loving nuzzle. When she pulled her head away, Rowanpaw leaned down to lick the fluff on her back.

Rowanpaw went quiet for a moment, the question on his mind trying to escape off his tongue. "Emberheart, can I ask you something?" He couldn't wait, even if it ruined the dream--he needed to know.

"Of course." She looked at him with soft, loving eyes.

Before he spoke, he rubbed against her chin again, taking her scent deep into his nostrils, fearful it would be for the last time. Then he leaned back, making sure to ingrain every stripe on her coat into his mind, then asked, "when I leave BatClan, will you still visit me?"

Sadness touched her gaze. "But it's not me visiting you, is it?" she asked softly, and his stomach clenched in fear and depression. "It's just the me you want to remember. You're alone, Rowanpaw, and after tomorrow..." her voice trailed off.

Rowanpaw just wanted to disappear. He wanted all the pain and sadness to wash away and let him be happy, even for a moment. "Why can't you be real? Why did you have to die?"

"I don't know," Emberheart murmured, but Rowanpaw knew that wasn't a real answer, and not the one Emberheart would've given. She would've said it was StarClan's plan, but he didn't want *to hear that answer. He didn't know what he wanted to hear...*

The apprentice lowered his eyes to his paws. "I hope you're okay," he whispered. "I hope you're happy, wherever you are..." For the briefest moment, he wished StarClan was real, so that he could one day see Emberheart again.

"I am," Emberheart said softly, her voice sounding a little strange, clearer than before and full of much more emotion. Rowanpaw looked up at her, seeing a gleam in her eyes that hadn't been there before, and her scent seemed much stronger in his nose. "You'll be happy again," she told him quietly, sounding so sad and sincere that it hurt his chest. "I promise, everything will be okay. I love you, Rowanpaw."

He didn't know why, or how, but this Emberheart seemed so real to him now, much more than before. The agony in his chest seemed to bloom like a thorn bush, pressing inside his skin like it was going to burst. "Like a sister?" he asked softly, voice hoarse.

Her eyes were so full of love he thought, surely, she must be seeing a different cat where he was, one who had not caused so much damage as he did.

"No," she whispered. "Like a mother."

And he was suddenly awake in his nest.

For a while, he just lay there, thinking, remembering. He had a feeling that he wouldn't see Emberheart again--at least, not in this life.

The moon was still in the sky, many hours before he would be forced to leave. But he wasn't going to be escorted from the territory like a prisoner. So he stood, feeling sore and tired but determined. His neck still stung slightly, but he knew it was healed enough.

"Going somewhere, Rowanpaw?" Hickoryclaw asked softly as the apprentice emerged from the log after days of being stuck in there.

"I'm leaving. Planning on stopping me?" He stared the tom challengingly in the eye, but the black tom just shrugged.

"What's the point? Whether you go now or later doesn't matter to me." There was a small twinkle in the tom's gaze, and Rowanpaw got the feeling there was a reason Hickoryclaw was on guard tonight.

The apprentice turned and padded away with a determined step, climbing the snowy rocks to the camp entrance. He looked out across the territory, and decided he was going to miss the view, despite the fact he couldn't really see anything of importance. Bunching his muscles, he leaped down to the earth, the ground hard and cold from snow. He walked quickly but smoothly, not wanting to rush himself.

He went in the direction of the unclaimed territory, but he knew he would be making a stop first. With his mind empty and set, it seemed to take no time to reach the log that had always stayed in his dreams. It was covered with thick white snow, and he silently

crawled inside, shivering from the cold under him.

"Sparkkit," he murmured, "I'm sorry it wasn't me. You would've made a great warrior... The Clan deserved you." He backed out, staring at the log as if Sparkkit would crawl out after him.

"You would've made a great warrior, too," said a soft voice behind him.

Rowanpaw whipped around, claws out, to find himself facing Dawnstar. "What are you doing here?"

"Hickoryclaw is a good warrior," she answered. "He told me yesterday he suspected you might try to leave early, and came to me right after you left."

"You should've brought him with you," Rowanpaw growled. "Don't you remember what happened last time I was alone with somebody?"

Dawnstar let out a tiny snort. "I think I can handle an apprentice," she meowed.

"Why are you here? I think it's obvious I'm leaving."

"I was just wondering why you didn't want to stay until tomorrow," she meowed. "You didn't get to say goodbye, after all."

"I don't need to," he growled.

"Okay," she meowed. "But I'll let brother and sisters know you were thinking of them."

I am. He didn't want their last memory to be of him leaving the Clan, he didn't want to see Primkit's face, to know whether she hated him or not, or whether Meadowkit and Fernkit were scared of him.

"Good luck out there, young one." Rowanpaw was surprised by the sincerity in her eyes.

He started to turn away, but a question nagged at his mind, and he

looked back at her and asked softly, "What... What are you planning... What's Blazepaw's warrior name going to be?"

She watched him for a long moment. "Blazewhisker," she finally answered.

Blazewhisker, he thought. "And... What was mine going to be?"

This pause was even longer. "Rattail," she meowed after a long silence, then turned around and began walking away. Rowanpaw stared after her for a moment, and he saw Dawnstar pause, looking over her shoulder. "But, I find Rowanfire sounds more suitable."

And when she left, Rowanpaw finally realized that he was no longer a part of a Clan.

I'm sorry, I was going through some personal issues this past month, and when I finally got to writing this it was shorter than I would've liked, but I think it is an alright chapter nonetheless. Definitely not a good one, but I think I've had worse. For once I'm actually in the mood to write, so hopefully my next chapter won't be in such a long time. It would make it extremely hard to write this book if each chapter took a month, huh?

Also, I don't know if that Emberheart scene hit hard for any of you guys, but my love for these characters and my knowledge of their futures made me almost cry as I wrote that "like a mother" line because of how much Rowanpaw hated the idea of having a mother. You never realize what you have until it's gone...

Chapter Sixteen

Willowpaw did her best to stretch sleep out of her bones, yawning into the cold morning air. Pebblepeak sat in the snow next to her, cleaning his gray tabby coat with surprising vigor. Beside her, Brightflower sniffing at the cobwebs still covering her side. The apprentice raised her head at the sound of muffled pawsteps, and saw Oakcloud padding over, a tired yawn parting his jaws. "Pebblepeak, are you really forcing your poor apprentice to go on *another* dawn patrol?" he murmured, shaking his coat to fluff it against the cold.

"Early cat gets the mouse," the young tabby replied. "And you don't mind, do you, Willowpaw?" He looked curiously at his young apprentice.

"As long as I can wake up first, then get something to eat. I'm starving," she admitted, still trying to shake sleep from her paws.

"Don't worry, I bet we'll find something to eat while we're out."

Hunger grumbled in Willowpaw's belly. She was glad border patrols were allowed to eat. Now completed, the patrol got up, finished stretching their muscles, then headed across the clearing for the forest entrance.

"Hold up!"

The patrol paused, looking over as Eagleclaw pushed her way through the snow, her coat fluffed to protect herself. "Eagleclaw, is something wrong?" Oakcloud tilted his head, a gleam of curiosity in his eyes.

"No. I've decided to come with you."

Pebblepeak and Oakcloud exchanged a glance. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" Pebblepeak asked softly. "Mossrain said--"

"I'm not staying stuck up in the camp," Eagleclaw meowed firmly. "A single dawn patrol won't kill me."

Though he looked hesitant, Oakcloud meowed, "I guess you're right. Do you want to lead?"

"No," she meowed. "This is your patrol, I'm just here to get away from camp for a bit."

Nodding, Oakcloud turned and led them down the rocks, moving slow and careful because of the slippery snow. Down at the ground level, the large brown tabby led them through the cold, snowy forest, the thick whiteness muffling the noises around Willowpaw's ears. Soft flakes began to flutter down as they walked, sprinkling their coats, and by the time they reached the border next to the mountains, Willowpaw was freezing from the melted snow that seemed to create tiny icicles under her skin.

As they approached the Old Thunderpath, Willowpaw cast a glance down it, watching the unclaimed territory like she expected to see her family coming back. She noticed that both Pebblepeak and Brightflower were looking, too--Silverstrike was out there, and it was obvious they were worried for their father. Eagleclaw was searching the distant trees with a deep look in her eyes.

"The patrol will be fine," Oakcloud soothed. "Boulderclaw and Silverstrike are some of the best warriors the Clan has--they'll keep everyone safe, I promise." He looked at Eagleclaw with a challenging expression. Noticing his gaze, she quickly shook herself out of her trance.

"Of course they are," she said, though it looked like she didn't quite know what she was agreeing with. "Let's continue on, we don't want to dawdle in the snow." And she set off at a determined pace in the opposite direction of the unclaimed territory. The patrol quickly followed, with Oakcloud going forward to walk next to the she-cat. He flicked his tail over her flank in a soothing manner.

They marked the border when needed, but walked in relative silence. Pebblepeak walked by Willowpaw's side, pointing out when the border was weak or where it was strong. They came across a

few scent trails of prey, but all led to holes in the ground or tree trunks, so they continued on with hunger growing in their bellies.

They were passing the Gathering Hollow, hidden by thick brambles. Eagleclaw veered off from the Old Thunderpath, moving to the brambles and sniffing at a hole made in the bushes, where Acornstar had forced the other three Clans to enter the Hollow from--they weren't allowed to enter the territory except from this point, so each Clan had to travel over the Old Thunderpath until this point.

"Oakcloud," Eagleclaw called to the tom, who was marking the border. "Come smell this." Looking curious, the brown tabby headed over, sniffing the brambles where his deputy had been.

"BatClan," he meowed.

"Is it old?" Pebblepeak asked, joining them to scent the undergrowth. After he flicked his tail to the two younger cats, Willowpaw and Brightflower joined him. As she approached, Willowpaw got the distinct scent of BatClan's sharp yet watery smell.

"Definitely fresh," Eagleclaw murmured. "Last night, I'd say. Young, and alone."

"I recognize this scent," Oakcloud murmured. "When Silverstrike's patrol left, from the bones on that we found on the dawn patrol. Pebblepeak, don't you agree?"

As her mentor stepped closer to the brambles, Willowpaw leaned her head closer and took a deep whiff through her scent glands, and she realized she faintly recognized the scent from the other day.

"That's the same scent," Pebblepeak confirmed.

"It's going into the Hollow," Eagleclaw meowed, "we'll follow it. If we can't find the cat, we might have to visit BatClan to see what's going on."

Fear shivered up Willowpaw's spine, but she noticed determination in Brightflower's gaze and forced herself to harden, wanting to

impress her friend. She followed close to her mentor as they passed through into the Hollow as Eagleclaw tracked the scent. It paused for a while at the river, then continued on back out of the Hollow and in the direction of--

"He's going into the unclaimed territory," Eagleclaw meowed as they once again reached the Old Thunderpath, where his scent continued into the small path between the mountains. They must've walked right over his scent when they were here before.

"Should we follow?" Oakcloud asked, now seemingly completely happy to pass control over to the deputy.

Eagleclaw hesitated for a moment, obviously thinking hard. Finally, she gave a nod. "Yes, we should. We need to know what he thinks he's doing, going so many places outside his territory." And she set forward at a determined trot, tail high. Instantly, the patrol hurried after her. Willowpaw found herself stepping closer to Pebblepeak's side. The young tom cast her a reassuring look and briefly let his pelt brush against her's.

The grass between the mountain and Old Thunderpath thinned until they would've only been able to walk one after another, but Eagleclaw just led the patrol onto the hard path, cushioned by the heavy snowfall. They walked on it until the land stretched out again, where Eagleclaw went back onto the snow-covered grass and once again picked up the trail. They followed it for quite a while, and though they scented prey Eagleclaw refused to let them hunt--she was obviously very interested in this scent.

This forest was rather different than the one in EchoClan territory, Willowpaw noticed. There wasn't as much as undergrowth, and the trees seemed just a little taller. She actually liked this territory a little more, without the constricting undergrowth pressing around her at all times. She could see, farther, too. That was one of the reasons she liked the moor better, but yet out there she felt a little *too* open.

Eagleclaw disappeared through some bracken, and the patrol pushed through after her to reveal a small clearing. At the other end was a cave, gaping like a yawning cat's jaws. A mound sat to one

side of the clearing, one that looked a lot like, to Willowpaw at least, a grave in the burial place in EchoClan territory.

"If anybody is in that cave, come out now!" Eagleclaw called to the dark hole. There were a few moments of silence, then two bright amber eyes glowed from the shadows. Willowpaw felt a twisting in her gut--the eyes looked so dark and guarded.

After a moment, a cat slipped from the cave. He was young and extremely thin, with dirty brown fur that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in quite a few days. His long, thin tail brushed over the ground and claws slid out from his dirty, mud-stained paws. "What do you want?" he growled. His voice was a little hoarse, full of suspicion and distrust.

"You have trespassed on our territory multiple times," Eagleclaw said, sounding firm but yet not harsh. "I would like to know why. I also want to know why a BatClan apprentice is out here in a cave, and not hunting for his Clan."

There was a cold glare in the young cat's eyes. "I'm not apart of BatClan anymore," he growled. "And I won't be on your territory anymore, though by the look of you it doesn't really matter. A few pieces of prey going missing won't kill any of you."

"It's still against the code," Eagleclaw's voice rose slightly, along with her neck fluff, but then she gave a deep breath and calmed herself. "Why have you left your Clan?"

"It's no business of yours!" he hissed. "Just leave me alone." And without another word, he turned and disappeared again into the darkness.

"Should we go after him?" Brightflower asked quietly.

"And do what?" Oakcloud questioned. "He obviously doesn't want us here."

"We'll have to watch our border more carefully from now on," Eagleclaw decided. "Come on, let's continue the patrol, and pray to StarClan SageClan is peaceful for once."

Willowpaw noticed a surprisingly cold glance from Pebblepeak toward the deputy, but he said nothing as he turned to follow the departing she-cat. Willowpaw followed after them, hurrying to walk next to her mentor.

"He's very rude, isn't he?" Oakcloud meowed as they headed back to EchoClan territory. "Obviously troubled."

"He's definitely an angry young tom," Eagleclaw agreed.

"I don't think he's angry," Willowpaw said quietly. "I think he's just lonely."

"Perhaps," Eagleclaw murmured. "Perhaps..." And the deputy said nothing else.

Pebblepeak allowed Willowpaw to go back to sleep after the dawn patrol, but she found herself restless inside her nest, despite her aching muscles and fuzzy mind. She kept replaying the very swift meeting with the young brown tom. She swore she recognized him. She lay there for a long time, trying to remember.

And suddenly, it hit her.

She had met him at the Gathering. Ratpaw was his name. He had introduced himself and his brother, Blazepaw. Even then Willowpaw had noticed a cloud over his head, but seeing him in the forest... Something had changed in him. He looked dark and so incredibly sad, like he had lost the one thing that had kept him living.

Despite her sore muscles, Willowpaw pushed herself up. She had been in the nest long enough she felt a little better but still tired. Yet she couldn't sleep, and she wouldn't sleep. Shaking her muscles loose, she slipped from the den, checking around the bright clearing. No cats were brave enough to be out in the snow, so Willowpaw padded to the warriors' den. She peeked her head inside, searching through the dark cave until she spotted Pebblepeak--but he was sleeping.

"Need something, Willowpaw?" Maskdapple was still curled up in her nest.

"I'm going to go out to hunt, and I just wanted Pebblepeak to know," Willowpaw meowed quickly, hoping the wise she-cat wouldn't catch her lie.

But Maskdapple just purred. "I'll let him know, just stay safe and don't take too long." She cast her son a loving look.

"Thank you." Willowpaw dipped her head, turned, and headed away. She crossed the snowy clearing, went down the rocks, and started through the forest. *I'll hunt on my way back,* she told herself.

She knew she was breaking the warrior code, but she wanted to make sure Ratpaw was okay. What if he needed help? Living alone out there couldn't be fun. Why would he leave his Clan? Surely not on his own will? But if he was exiled, should Willowpaw be going to see him? *I'm already on my way, I can't turn back now.* But she could've. She could've just turned to hunt.

But yet she continued to the Old Thunderpath, following the trail she had taken on the dawn patrol. She went through the mountain pass, entered the tall forest, listening to the birds calling from high in the trees. Anxiety prickled in her belly as she neared the clearing where the young tom had been.

"What are you doing back here?"

The voice made her jump from her skin. Whipping around, Willowpaw found herself facing the brown tom, his tail high in hostility and his eyes guarded. "Um, I..." She was suddenly scared of the tom. She wasn't here with any warriors, they couldn't protect her if he decided to attack.

When she didn't continue her attempted answer, he let out an annoyed sigh and growled, "just go away. I'm not hunting on your territory anymore." He seemed to deflate, as if he didn't have the strength to continue being hostile. He padded past her toward his den, a heavy step in each paw.

"I didn't come because of that!" Willowpaw called after him. He paused, turning to look with a tired glance. "I... I wanted to make sure you were okay..."

The confusion in his eyes was evident. "Why?" he growled. "You don't know me, so why would you care?"

Willowpaw realized she didn't have an answer. "I don't know," she said finally. "I just... I thought you seemed lonely..."

His lip curled slightly, but there was a glaze over his eyes. "I'm better off alone. Now, go away." He started to leave again.

Willowpaw stared after him, knowing more than ever all he truly needed was a friend, someone to listen. "You're Ratpaw, aren't you?" she asked.

He froze. "No," he growled, and she noticed that, despite his obvious exhaustion, his fur was beginning to bristle. "Not anymore. My name is Rowanpaw now."

He changed his name? Willowpaw thought curiously. "That's cool," she said. "I like the name Rowanpaw."

He turned to look at her quickly, a flare in his eyes. "Don't lie to me," he said warningly.

"I'm not!" she meowed quickly, surprised by his sudden anger. "It's a nice name, really."

His eyes were still full of distrust. "You're Snowfern's daughter, right?"

His words surprised her. "Uh, yeah. My name's Willowpaw."

"She's from BatClan."

"Yeah," Willowpaw responded, despite the fact it hadn't been a question.

"You're half-BatClan."

"I guess." She didn't know where he was going with this, but he was talking to her, even though it was in a cold monotone.

"But you never suffered."

Willowpaw was surprised. "Suffered?" She knew that BatClan was hungry, that much was obvious from the Gathering, but suffering? Would the Clans really let another die because of pride?

"Every single day," he growled. "Cats die from hunger every moon while EchoClan stuffs themselves! Look at yourself! Fatter in leaf-bare than any cat in BatClan has ever been!"

And Willowpaw did. She looked down at her side, not skinny but not plump. She was healthy. She had told Pebblepeak she was starving this morning. But she didn't know what starving was. This tom had seen so much more than she ever will. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You think that helps?" he hissed. "A single sorry doesn't make up for countless moons of starvation, where kits die at their mother's stomach! Or a kit grows up without a mother..." Memories took over his eyes, so painful Willowpaw could almost feel it.

"I know it doesn't," she whispered. "But it's all I can say. I can't speak for cats from the past, but I can speak for myself. I promise I'll try to help BatClan until the day I die."

"Promises mean nothing," he growled.

"It's all I can give," she said back.

He didn't answer, breathing heavy and deep, like he was struggling to control himself.

Slowly, Willowpaw sat down, watching him with a soft expression. "Do you want to talk about BatClan?" she asked quietly.

"No," he growled firmly, but yet he didn't leave. His tail was flicking softly and his ears were low, but stayed where he was, just watching her with a dark, guarded gaze.

"Okay," Willowpaw meowed. After a few moments, she added, "My mentor's name is Pebblepeak. He's young, but he's a good teacher."

"I don't care," he hissed.

"Okay," she said again, but after a few moments she meowed, "my first day of apprenticeship, he taught me to climb to the top of a tree."

He was silent.

She continued, "the breeze was amazing, the air tasted... fresh. Clean. I almost fell when I was going down." She purred as she remembered the moment when her back claws had momentarily unhooked from the bark and she hung from her front paws. She had managed to get her grip back, but she still remembered the rush of terror almost two moons later.

Something flashed in Rowanpaw's eyes. Willowpaw was quiet, watching him with a soft expression. After many moments of silence, he murmured, "my best friend fell from a tree."

"I'm so sorry," Willowpaw meowed, and she truly meant it.

"She died. It was my fault."

"You can't blame yourself for those things happening," Willowpaw told him. She dared herself to scoot closer, scuffling the snow. He looked at her, but said nothing once again. "Sometimes, bad things happen, and there's nothing you can do. No matter how much you go over it, you can't change the past. Thinking of something different to do just causes more pain."

His eyes lowered to his paws. "The past still hurts," he growled.

"You can't change it, though," Willowpaw meowed, moving even closer. She was a tail length away, but he wasn't telling her to back off, so she settled where she was for the time being. "But you can use it for the future. Don't forget what happened, but don't dwell on it either. Maybe you can prevent something similar from happening in the future."

He didn't answer.

Somehow, Willowpaw knew enough had been said. "I should head back," she meowed, slowly standing.

His eyes shot up to her. For the tiniest moment, Willowpaw thought she saw sadness. Not at her leaving, though, she knew that. Sadness for all that he had lost.

"'Bye, Rowanpaw," she said, turning and waving her tail. She walked slowly, wondering if he was going to say something.

Right before she slipped through into some snowy bracken, he called, "will you come back?" His meow was still cold, and his eyes were dark with hate. For her? She wasn't sure, but she didn't think so.

She looked at him, quiet for a moment. "Maybe," she said mysteriously, though she knew she would. "I guess we'll have to see."

Then she pushed through the bracken, and the young tom disappeared from sight.

Chapter Seventeen

The patrol had been away from EchoClan for seven sunrises now, and Ravenpaw had never felt such a strong longing for home. He missed the smell of the medicine cats' den, Mossrain's rants about nothing, the crash of the waterfall that he never noticed until it was gone--but stronger than anything else, he missed his mother. He missed the soft heather smell of her fur after she went hunting on the moor, and the feeling of her short coat after it was freshly washed.

Ravenpaw felt Jaypaw stir beside him, his thick fur messy and dirty with bits of dry moss from their makeshift nest. Uncomfortable from the low amount of moss under him, he rolled onto his back, feeling a light sting of pain. The previous night the only place they had found to sleep was under some ferns right next to a thorn bush, and Ravenpaw had awoken during the night with the sharp thorns scratching his back. Luckily, he had found dock early the next morning and now the light wounds were healing well, and barely annoyed him when walking. Sleeping, on the other paw, was a different matter.

The medicine cat felt himself slipping in and out of sleep, hearing the pawsteps of a few cats leaving when the sun was still dull. The next thing he knew, broken streams of sunlight was shining on his face and he could hear the pawsteps returning, the scent of fresh prey flooding his scent glands. With a groan, he rolled over, feeling Jaypaw shift beside him, opening his white jaws into a large yawn.

"I'm starving," the gray and white apprentice complained, shaking his head to clear it of sleep.

"Good thing we have prey," Shadefur's meow sounded from outside their small den under a thick bush. Licking his jaws and stretching his legs, Ravenpaw forced himself to his paws and slipped out of the den, blinking at the cold sunlight. Icy snow stung his paws, and he shivered at the wind attacking his dense, short coat. He felt slightly

jealous of Jaypaw, who fluffed his heavy fur the moment he appeared from the bush.

Everybody else of the patrol was already awake, beginning to settle down in order to eat the prey just caught. Ravenpaw started for his father, but he couldn't help but notice Rain was apart from the group, sniffing at a mouse at his paws. "Ravenpaw, this is for you." Boulderclaw pushed half a squirrel through the snow--Frostfall was eating the other half by Silverstrike's side.

Ravenpaw went to the squirrel, not knowing what to do. Finally, he grabbed the squirrel after thanking his father, then padded quietly over to Rain and settling by the tom. Ravenpaw didn't look at his Clanmates, not wanting to see their response--what if Boulderclaw was disappointed? Shaking the fear out of his mind, Ravenpaw began to eat. He knew Rain was appreciative, and after a moment the tom tucked into his own prey.

After their meal, the Clan cats sat in a comfortable silence as they cleaned their fur and completely woke up. Frostfall had went back to the den in order to catch Acornstar's scent, which they had found under the bush. She followed it back out, going through the snow with obvious concentration. How she could scent the she-cat Ravenpaw didn't know--he had tried to catch the leader's scent, and only found it if he tried as hard as he could on something she had rubbed against. But somehow, Frostfall had managed to follow the trail even on open ground; she could obviously smell much better than any of the other cats.

"We should head out," she called over to them.

"Then let's," Silverstrike meowed, getting to his paws and shaking this thick coat of the snow that was stuck to his belly. The rest of the patrol followed suit, and as they walked Ravenpaw moved to walk beside Jaypaw, watching his brother walk. He was healing well, with only his shoulder still injured. He had the tiniest limp, but it didn't seem to bother him much. The only other cat he hurried about was Silverstrike, who's scratched pad wasn't getting better but wasn't worse either. Ravenpaw had checked it last night and it was free from infection, but still slightly opened. The snow was, luckily, protecting it from injury, but if the tom walked too

long his limp would get worse and he could occasionally bleed lightly.

Frostfall led them along the Thunderpath for a little while before crossing to the other side, slipping through bushes and pausing where Acornstar had hunted a mouse--the ground had been too frozen to bury the prey, so instead a pile of snow had been scooped over it. But they hadn't been going for too long when the she-cat suddenly stopped, raising her head with flicking ears, nose twitching.

"There are cats up ahead," she said softly. "Coming toward us."

Ravenpaw opened his jaws to take in scents, but there was nothing. He strained his ears to listen, and after a few heartbeats he heard a tiny sound, a distant voice he couldn't make out. "In the bushes, now," Silverstrike ordered, and the cats separated, tucking down into snowy bushes. Ravenpaw crouched next to Boulderclaw with Jaypaw against him, and his father rubbed against the base of a bush, showering them with snow.

"Stay still," he ordered. "The snow will hide you." Ravenpaw nodded quietly, feeling the cold snow begin to melt and chill his skin. He saw the other cats of the patrol, but knew he could only see them because he knew they were there. Frostfall was almost completely hidden, only her bright blue eyes visible.

After many moments, three cats slipped from the bushes. They were young, likely barely seven moons old. The one in the front was a gray tabby tom, with his eyes quite striking--one was a bright, glowing amber and the other a deep forest green. Behind him were two brown tabby she-cats, one a little lighter with green eyes and the other darker with amber eyes.

They continued past the cats without saying anything, but Ravenpaw noticed one of the she-cats, the lighter one, was limping slightly, a trail of blood down one back leg. Suddenly, the tom stopped. He sniffed the air, and his fur bristled. "Who's there?" he called, looking around warily, but his eyes went right over the Clan cats.

Ravenpaw saw Silverstrike nodding to each member of the patrol, and after a moment they appeared together, the six cats slipping from the bushes like silent shadows. Ravenpaw and Jaypaw quietly followed their father a moment later, keeping close to his side. The moment the patrol appeared, the young tom instantly slid out his claws, facing them with surprising bravery. Both his sisters joined him, fluffing their fur and flattening their ears.

"Don't do anything stupid, kits," Silverstrike warned.

"We're not here to fight," the tom said, with surprising voice. He didn't sound scared, despite the fact he was so young and facing so many large, intimidating warriors.

"Neither are we," Silverstrike answered, though his mew was curt and a little cold.

"Then why hide in the bushes?" the tom countered, flashing his eyes between the cats, like he was making sure none of them were going to attack.

"We didn't know who you were, or how many of you there were." Silverstrike eyed the young tom curiously. "You're either brave or stupid," he added, "standing up to us like this."

"I'll protect my family no matter what," the gray tabby hissed. "Like my mother and father did." He shifted his weight, getting into a better attack stance.

"And where are they?" Boulderclaw asked, his tone much kinder, though still guarded. Ravenpaw noticed a strange look in his father's eyes, and he was watching the gray tabby with a strange intensity.

The young tom watched him for a moment, then finally responded, "dead".

The patrol was instantly stalled in their hostility. "For how long?" Frostfall asked softly.

The young tom hesitated. He looked at his sisters, and the one with darker fur gave a small nod. Together, the young cats lowered their

fur and slid their claws back in. Looking rather grateful, the light brown tabby got down to her belly, her leg obviously paining her. Ravenpaw had to hold himself back from moving forward to check on her. "Our father died before we were born," meowed the dark brown tabby, her voice soft and quiet.

"Our mother just half a moon ago." The light brown tabby looked at her paws as she spoke, the sadness in her mew obvious.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Boulderclaw meowed sincerely, his tail low in the snow.

"Where are you headed?" Silverstrike questioned.

"To her home," the light brown tabby meowed.

"And where's that?" Silverstrike eyed them curiously.

"We don't know, exactly," the tom meowed, looking at both his sisters briefly. "She mentioned the Thunderpath and those mountains, but... She died before she could finish." He had nodded to the mountains barely visible through the leafless trees--the exact mountains the Clan cats had come from.

For a few moments, the Clan cats looked around at each other, then Silverstrike meowed, "what are your names?"

"I'm Rock," the gray tabby meowed. "After my father," he added proudly.

"I'm Pine," said the dark brown tabby.

"Lark," meowed the last.

"And your mother's?" Boulderclaw asked.

"Robin," answered Lark.

Silverstrike nodded slowly, while Boulderclaw continued to stare, his eyes staring down Rock like he was thinking hard. *Are they Clan cats?* Ravenpaw wondered silently, sizing them up. They looked like they could've been, but what about their names, and their parents'?

Had Robin changed her name like Violetfrost had? Sudden fear washed through Ravenpaw--what if they were from MothClan?

He looked over at Rain, and the tom caught his eye. Almost as if he knew the question on the young tom's mind, he gave a tiny shake of his head. Ravenpaw instantly trusted his judgment--he would've known if a Robin and Rock were in MothClan--there *had* once a Robinpaw in MothClan, but they had been a tom and died many moons ago. And if there had been a Rock, Rain obviously didn't think they could father these kits before them.

"Has she ever mentioned something called a Clan?" Silverstrike asked.

"No," Rock said.

"What's a Clan?" Pine asked.

"A group of cats that live and survive together," Frostfall answered. "We help each other, keep each other safe."

"There are four," Shadefur meowed. "We live by the Thunderpath on the other side of the mountains."

All the kits looked curious. "Do you think our mother is from your Clan? Or one of them?" A glint of excitement glowed in Rock's eyes.

"We wouldn't know," Silverstrike meowed.

"We could direct you to our territory. See what Eagleclaw thinks?" Stonecoat added the second part to his Clanmates.

"They couldn't go alone," Frostfall argued. "They'd need someone to explain to Eagleclaw."

"I'll go."

Ravenpaw was surprised by the speed of Boulderclaw's mew, and sadness flickered in his heart. Boulderclaw noticed his depressed look.

"They need a guide," he said softly. "I know you'll do fine without

me."

"I can bring them back instead," Shadefur meowed, a particular gleam in his eyes.

Boulderclaw scoffed softly. "Mossrain will do fine without *you,* Shadefur," he said in amusement. "No, I can go back. Just keep my family safe, Silverstrike," he added to his brother.

"Always," Silverstrike answered without hesitation. "Be safe, Boulderclaw."

"Always," he responded back, then looked at the three young loners. "You're okay with this, of course?"

Rock looked at his sisters, then nodded. "We're tired of living alone," he said. "We don't need cats to look after us, but... It would be nice to know someone other than these two." He jerked his head to his sisters.

Quietly, Ravenpaw pressed against his father. "I should check Lark's wound," he whispered to him.

Boulderclaw nodded. "Why don't we rest for a while? We can hunt for you three, get up your strength a little, if you're hungry?"

"Starving!" Pine meowed. "We haven't eaten yet today."

"Let's change that then. While we hunt, my son Ravenpaw will check that wound of yours, Lark."

After a nod from Boulderclaw, the black apprentice moved forward to the light tabby. She looked a little wary, but shifted so he could look at her back leg. "I fell into some thorns," she said softly.

"More than some," Ravenpaw murmured, leaning forward to lick away the blood. He was strangely used to the harsh taste, and it didn't bother him. The she-cat flinched slightly but tried to stay still.

"You know about healing?" she asked curiously.

"I'm a medicine cat apprentice," he explained. When she looked confused, he said, "I work with herbs to heal my Clan. I'm only learning right now, but I'll know more eventually."

"What are you going to use on my leg?"

"Whatever I can find," he muttered in response, sitting up. "Dock would probably be easier to find than goldenrod..." And with nothing else to say, Ravenpaw turned and padded off mindlessly, his nose in the air in search for the tangy smell of dock. He heard pawsteps, and looked to see Rain was following him.

The tom let him work in silence, searching the woods with eyes and nose. It seemed luck was on his side, today, because he spotted a snowy patch of dock quite quickly. Hurrying over, he shook it free of snow and chose the best looking leaves, then turned and went back to Lark, feeling quite safe with Rain beside him.

No cat had returned from hunting yet, but as Ravenpaw settled and began to chew Shadefur and Stonecoat returned with a mouse, and then Silverstrike and Frostfall with, surprisingly, a rabbit. As the patrol had just ate, they let the young loners take the prey and settled down to share tongues.

Lark was distracted with her mouse and barely reacted to Ravenpaw's work, and he leaned back with chewed dock staining his muzzle and paws. "Try not to rub it against anything," he suggested.

"It feels better already," Lark meowed happily. "Medicine cats seem quite helpful!"

Stung with embarrassment, Ravenpaw gave an awkward nod then went back to Boulderclaw, curling up by his father's side. The large tom gave him a reassuring lick on the forehead. "Don't worry, little one," he meowed, "you'll be back to the Clan soon. I'm sure Acornstar isn't far."

"I hope not," Ravenpaw murmured. Anxiety rumbled in his stomach about his father leaving, and for a brief moment he wished he would be leaving with him.

I've found it a lot easier to write recently, more because I've found a good time to do it. I already have the next Chapter almost done, and so now (hopefully) I'll always have a Chapter done by the time I post the one before it, just in case I can't find the motivation to write for a while I can have extra time by posting the next Chapter. I don't know if that makes sense, but hopefully it does. And hopefully you enjoyed, too!

Chapter Eighteen

"Come on, Willowpaw, hurry up now," Pebblepeak called back to the young she-cat. Willowpaw tried to make her paws move faster, but the scratchy stone of the tunnel made her fur shiver and she had the instinct to slow. Snowfern brushed against her side.

"I don't like it either," she said softly in her daughter's ear. "But it's good to get used to it."

Willowpaw didn't exactly agree but didn't argue, either. The tunnel they were taking was hidden behind the Rock Pile in the clearing, and it led into the forest not far from the Gathering Hollow. Willowpaw could hear the rest of the Clan's group ahead of her, led by Eagleclaw. The darkness pressed at her eyes and her gaze refused to adjust to the shadows, as there was nothing to make out anyway--just long, smooth walls.

By the time they reached the end of the tunnel Willowpaw's pads felt scraped, and she was happy to emerge into the cold night air. The snow felt extremely cold against her paws, and she shivered from the freezing breeze.

"Let's keep moving, it'll keep us warm," Eagleclaw called from the front of the group as she started off. Willowpaw followed along Snowfern's side, Pebblepeak in front of her.

The forest was dark and silent, only broken by the muffled pawsteps of the cats. Willowpaw cast a glance up to the sky--through the empty branches was the full moon, high in the sky and almost at its peak. She briefly turned her gaze to the Star Streak, the long stretch of stars over the Old Twolegplace, for once unblocked by nighttime clouds. Willowpaw wondered what it would look like from the camp clearing.

When the Clan reached the Gathering Hollow and slipped through the bushes, they found it empty of any cats. Willowpaw shook her

coat to warm herself up then headed across the clearing, stopping by the small stream and taking a few drinks, the freezing water hurting her throat. Shivering at the new cold that filled her, the young apprentice decided to go back to her mother, who noticing her shivering and pressed her warm side against her.

Grateful for the warmth, Willowpaw watched as her Clan mingled about with each other, cleaning spaces of snow or searching the undergrowth for wandering prey. Eagleclaw sat at the base of the leader's tree with Mossrain, talking quietly with the medicine cat. Willowpaw was quite close, but it was hard to make out their whispered voices--they obviously did not want to be overheard.

She was tempted to scoot away from her mother to catch a few of their words, but the two stopped speaking when the bushes across the clearing rustled and a group of cats slowly emerged. Willowpaw recognized their small, broad frames as the CrowClan cats, lead by Whitestar and Roseclaw. Their medicine cat, Hawkstream, followed after the two she-cats as they headed for where Eagleclaw and Mossrain waited.

"I don't see Acornstar," Whitestar meowed as she approached. "I hope nothing has happened?" Though her voice was calm, Willowpaw detected a faint trace of excitement. Was the leader hoping Acornstar had passed, and Eagleclaw had taken over?

"She's sick, I'm afraid," Eagleclaw meowed calmly with a small dip of her head. "I'll be leading EchoClan for this Gathering."

Willowpaw caught the obvious disappointment in the CrowClan leader's eyes, but it swiftly disappeared. "I hope she recovers," Whitestar meowed. "Tell her I wish her well."

"Of course, thank you." Eagleclaw seemed very calm, and Willowpaw fought away the wishing that Whitestar's assumsion had been true.

CrowClan and EchoClan exchanged soft greetings, but like her first Gathering, Willowpaw noticed a drift between the Clans. *Have we always been this far apart*? She wondered. Had the Clans ever conversed at Gatherings like friends, or at least fellow cats?

She was distracted by BatClan appearing, and sudden curiosity rushed through her. Why had they cast Rowanpaw out? Why was the poor young tom now wandering alone? She had met Blazepaw, too, at her first Gathering. He was Rowanpaw's brother. He would know, wouldn't he? She watched as the new cats settled into the snow, keeping close and murmuring uncertainly. Dawnstar, with her deputy and medicine cat, headed to the tree.

"Welcome, Dawnstar." Eagleclaw dipped her head.

"Thank you, Eagleclaw. Is Acornstar not here this night?" Willowpaw tried to read the leader as she had Whitestar, but the she-cat betrayed no emotion she could catch, except a mild curiosity.

"Ill at home," Eagleclaw responded.

"I'm sorry to hear that." She sounded sincere.

"Of course." It seemed even Eagleclaw was trying to read the she-cat, but was likely having no luck. "How is your Clan?"

"Fairing," she said vaguely, with the tiniest flick of her tail tip. "And yours?"

"Just as well," was Eagleclaw's response. "Our kits are growing strong."

"CrowClan is having similar luck," Whitestar put in softly. "Fawnriver's litter is growing well despite the cold."

"How are your litters, Dawnstar?" Eagleclaw's head tilted slightly.

Dawnstar was quiet for a moment, then finally admitted, "we lost one of our queens, I'm afraid. Almost a moon ago. Her kit is being nursed by our other queen."

"That's a great shame," Eagleclaw murmured, with obvious regret. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"I am as well," Dawnstar murmured softly, while Whitestar murmured a prayer to StarClan.

Willowpaw felt grief from Snowfern at the news of the departed she-cat, and gave her mother's ear a soft lick before turning and slipping away, weaving through her Clanmates and past a few CrowClan cats. She reached the river's edge, not far from where the BatClan cats were gathered. She spotted Blazepaw near the back of the group, sitting slightly by himself and looking around blankly.

It took a few moments, but she finally managed to catch his eye, and instantly jerked in her head as a way to tell him to come over. He seemed faintly surprised, and looked around to make sure it was him being summoned, then he stood and quietly padded over, looking confused.

"Blazepaw, right?" she clarified, hoping she hadn't called over some random apprentice.

"Yeah. I met you last moon, didn't I?" He spoke quietly, and had a strange glaze over his eyes, a faint look of empty sadness.

"Yeah, I'm Willowpaw. I..." *I hope I don't mess this up...* "I wanted to talk about... Rowanpaw?" She kept her voice low.

Excitement instantly flared in the young cat's gaze. "You saw him?" he asked hopefully, then fear trickled in. "Is he in trouble?"

"No, he's okay," Willowpaw reassured him, glad that he was interested. "I, uh, well I tracked him to where he's staying in the unclaimed territory, a little cave. I talked to him a bit. He seemed really sad."

Depression seeped into Blazepaw's eyes. "He is sad," the tom murmured. "And lonely. I'm surprised he talked to you."

"I did most of the talking," Willowpaw admitted. "But at the end, he asked if I would come back."

"You will, won't you?" Blazepaw asked hopefully. "I can't get away to visit him, someone would notice, but if you could... I just really don't want him alone..."

"I'll visit him when I can," Willowpaw promised. "But it would be helpful to know him." She looked to where the Clans normally

entered from, hoping SageClan would not yet appear--she didn't want her conversation interrupted by the Gathering starting officially.

"Rowanpaw's always been a little depressed," Blazepaw murmured. "But he's also always cared for his Clan. We never knew our father, and our mother disappeared when we were young. Rowanpaw used to wish for her to come back, but eventually just realized she never would, and ended up hating her, a lot..."

"I'm so sorry," Willowpaw murmured. She didn't know what she would do without her own parents...

"It's okay. We had Bloomcloud, and her litter. She raised us..." A flame of sadness twisted in his eyes. "Rowanpaw was never completely okay with it. It got worse when we lost Sparkkit. We went out during a storm, and she... she died, I almost did, too. Rowanpaw's always blamed himself."

"Was that the cat who fell from a tree?" Willowpaw asked softly, recalling what little Rowanpaw had told her.

"I'm surprised he mentioned it," Blazepaw murmured. "I'm guessing he didn't mention Emberheart, though?"

"No." Willowpaw shook her head. "Who's that?"

"His old mentor," Blazepaw explained softly. "She died a moon ago, giving birth." Willowpaw nodded slowly, remembering what Dawnstar had said. "She and Rowanpaw were really close, and her dying... I think he died, too, on the inside. He would never admit it, but I think she was the mother he never had--he didn't want a mother, he hated the idea, but still..."

"No wonder he looked so sad..." Willowpaw whispered. The poor tom, he was so broken...

"Maybe you can help him out," Blazepaw mewed hopefully. "He needs someone... kind. Someone who knows things will work out. In BatClan, we don't really feel that way..." His claws scratched the snowy earth. "Nobody really has hope anymore, we've all seen too

many cats die. Emberheart was different, she always thought things could get better... Maybe she was wrong..."

Willowpaw didn't know what to say, but didn't even get the chance--the bushes trembled and out stepped Dewnose with her Clanmates around her. Willowpaw was surprised to see that Robinstar wasn't there--was he sick? Or perhaps he had disappeared like Acornstar had; Willowpaw knew that was unlikely, and said a quiet, distracted goodbye as she hurried back to her mother.

Many other cats were already whispering curiously, watching quietly as Dewnose slowly approached the other leaders.

"Dewnose," Whitestar greeted, "Is everything alright in SageClan? We were worried you were not going to show."

"Is Robinstar alright?" Eagleclaw added.

"Robinstar passed to StarClan just the other night," Dewnose announced sadly. "I have received my nine lives."

The three other leaders respectfully dipped their heads in prayer. Dawnstar seemed unusually upset, a strong gleam of sadness in her eyes. "He was a great warrior," she murmured softly.

"Poor Robinstar..." Snowfern whispered from beside Willowpaw. The young apprentice could feel her mother quivering, and her claws dug into the hard earth. She, too, seemed unnaturally sad about the death of a leader from another Clan. Snowfern looked at her daughter, seemingly noticing her worried gaze. "I owe Robinstar my life," she said softly. "He saved the life of my father a long, long time ago, back when he was just an apprentice."

So I owe him my life, too? Willowpaw thought, a pang of sadness piercing her chest. Why did cats have to die? Why couldn't everyone just live peaceful and happy?

"I'm sure you will be a great leader for SageClan, Dewstar," Eagleclaw's voice cut into Willowpaw's mind.

"Thank you, Eagleclaw. Or is it Eaglestar now?" For the third time, a hint of excitement. Every leader wished that Acornstar had left for

StarClan... Was she really that hated, that her death would be better for the Clans?

"Acornstar is at camp, ill," Eagleclaw explained. "But I still think this could be a new future for our Clans--a new time of peace, perhaps? Where the mistakes of the past can be forgotten?"

"Not forgotten," Dewstar answered. "But maybe gotten over. We can't forget the past, but we don't need to dwell on it either."

Eagleclaw nodded in agreement. "Should we start the Gathering?" She looked over at the leaders.

They looked unused to the treatment, but then nodded agreement, and together the four cats climbed the tree. Dawnstar seemed weak, going slow and with difficulty. They all settled together, and with a yowl from Whitestar the Clan cats quieted and looked up at their leaders.

Dewstar stood, looking down at the cats with brief anxiety in her eyes before she pushed it away. "Yesterday night, Robinstar regretfully joined StarClan," she announced. The information seemed to have already traveled to most cats, but there were still many murmurs of grief. "I have replaced Robinstar as leader, with Gorsedust as my new deputy."

She nodded down to the gray tabby below her, his pale brown-green eyes looking out over the cats with quiet seriousness. He looked like a respectable cat, and Willowpaw could hear murmurs through the cats that informed her everyone else agreed.

Next to step forward was Whitestar. "All of CrowClan feels for your loss, Dewstar. I wish you healthy moons of leadership." She dipped her head, then added to the watching cats, "CrowClan has been healthy so far this leaf-bare, and we expect peaceful moons. We have no other news."

Whitestar nodded to Eagleclaw, and the deputy stood up, her claws scratching the tree under her. "EchoClan is doing well. Acornstar is currently sickly, but will be back to herself in no time." There were audible snorts and groans from the cats. Eagleclaw's ears flicked,

but she said nothing about it. "We have two new warriors, Brightflower and Petaldust." She nodded to the two tortoiseshells, who both sat proudly with raised heads. Brightflower looked a little more embarrassed but forced herself past it.

Eagleclaw nodded to Dawnstar and sat down again.

The leader hesitated, standing quietly. She was quiet for a few moments, then meowed slowly, "I..." She stopped herself. The others on the branch looked at each other. "For many moons, BatClan has hidden how much we struggle. I'm sure it's obvious, but we deny it constantly..." She turned to look to the leaders and Eagleclaw. "I worry that BatClan will not survive this leaf-bare," she said softly. "We have so many kits, so many who cannot hunt for themselves... Many have already starved... We've lost warriors, elders, queens, kits, apprentices... Nobody is spared, no matter how much we hunt. There's just not enough prey... We lost another warrior just this morning..." She looked at the leaders with a desperate gleam. "Bloomcloud died so her kits could live to see another dawn..."

Another cat to grow up without parents? Willowpaw felt so bad for all the cats in BatClan. She pressed closer to her mother, knowing how much her love for her helped her each day. Snowfern curled her tail around Willowpaw's side, leaning close and resting her head against Willowpaw's head. The apprentice focused on her mother's sweet smell, slightly watery and reminding Willowpaw of the scent on Blazepaw, despite the fact Snowfern hadn't lived in BatClan for many seasons.

"What are you asking for, Dawnstar?" Eagleclaw meowed softly, her mew kind but still a little suspicious.

"Help," she said honestly. "We need help... We need prey."

"You want us to give you our prey?" Whitestar asked in surprise.

"I know it's a lot to ask," Dawnstar meowed quietly, her eyes on her paws. Willowpaw had to strain her ears to hear her, and it didn't help that she could hear whispers in the back of the crowd from cats who couldn't understand her soft words. Luckily, Dawnstar rose her voice back up again. "But my Clanmates are dying. I beg of you,

each of you, please let us have... something. Perhaps a piece of territory, or even the allowance to hunt on your territory. We just need... something."

She sounded so broken, so defeated. Her head dropped and her ears were flat, her tail drifting off the side of the branch. Willowpaw almost wished she was leader, so she could agree to help the poor she-cat.

The leaders and Eagleclaw glanced at each other. "Dawnstar," Eagleclaw said softly, "I cannot speak for Whitestar and Dewstar, but I know I cannot give territory, as it's not my decision. If Acornstar was here maybe the answer would be different, but I can't make such a decision without her."

Dawnstar nodded, as if she already knew that EchoClan would refuse. Willowpaw felt a flash of annoyance for Eagleclaw, but forced it down--she was right, after all, wasn't she? Even if Acornstar was gone, she was still leader, and she would be furious if she returned and Eagleclaw had given away territory.

Whitestar was quiet for a moment, then meowed, "I would need to speak to my Clan."

"I as well," Dewstar agreed.

"My Clan cannot wait another moon," Dawnstar pleaded.

Whitestar and Dewstar looked surprisingly apologetic. After a few moments, the white she-cat stood and said, "Tomorrow at sunhigh, send a patrol to our border. We will have your answer then."

"We will be ready, too, and wait for you by the Thunderpath near CrowClan's border," Dewstar added.

Dawnstar nodded gratefully. "Thank you, both of you."

"Then I guess this Gathering is at an end," Eagleclaw meowed.

The leaders made their way down the tree, and Snowfern stood, hurrying forward. In a split-second decision, Willowpaw decided to stay by her mother's side. Surprisingly, she didn't go for Eagleclaw,

but instead Dawnstar, who was starting to head back to her Clan.

"Dawnstar!" Snowfern called. The leader looked back, a surprisingly soft look in her eye.

"Snowfern," she said softly, stepping close to the white and black she-cat to touch noses. "It's good to see you. Is this your kit?" She cast a kind gaze over to Willowpaw.

"I'm Willowpaw," the apprentice greeted with a respectful dip of her head, trying to hide the shiver running up her spine.

"It's good to meet you. You should know you have an amazing mother."

Snowfern blinked softly at the praise. "I'm sorry things are going down in BatClan," Snowfern murmured. "How is everyone?"

"Surviving," Dawnstar answered softly. "Well, some of us."

"Listen, Dawnstar." Snowfern stepped a little closer, lowering her voice and casting a gaze around to make sure no cat was too close. She didn't seem to mind Willowpaw pressed against her, though. "We found out one of your apprentices had left your Clan. Ratpaw?"

Dawnstar's eyes went soft, and she was quiet for a few moments. "He..." She broke off and sighed, obviously struggling with what to say. "His destiny rested outside BatClan."

"But he's so young," Snowfern murmured. "Are you sure he'll be okay?"

"I think..." She swallowed, then sighed again. "I think he'll be lonely, but he can be himself out there. That was something he could never be in BatClan." There was a dark gleam in her eyes like she was trying to decide to say something. Finally, she said softly, "you know... he almost... he almost reminds me of... of Hawkstar..."

Willowpaw felt a shiver of grief so strong through her mother that she thought the warrior would fall over, but yet she was also stiff at the same time.

"He's confused," Dawnstar explained softly, "and sad, but his determination and bravery and love for his family... It's a lot like Hawkstar. For a while, I thought Ratpaw had a good chance to be a great warrior..."

Snowfern gave a quiet nod. "I miss Hawkstar, too," she whispered softly. Willowpaw cast a look up at her mother. She sounded so sad... How close had she been to Hawkstar? Surely she would've left long enough ago that they would've faded?

Dawnstar gave a soft nod. A BatClan warrior approached softly, looking hesitant. Willowpaw realized this wasn't just a warrior, but instead Clovertail, the BatClan deputy. "Dawnstar? The Clan is ready to go."

"Of course." Dawnstar nodded quickly, as if she were clearing her head. "Thank you for the talk, Snowfern." She dipped her head as a goodbye and padded off.

"Snowfern." Clovertail dropped her head as well then followed her leader. Then the deputy paused, and she looked back. "I... I don't know if Dawnstar told you, but Heronclaw is... gone." Then she turned and padded away.

For a few moments the white and black warrior watched after her old Clanmates, a fresh wave of sadness coming from her coat, then she flicked an ear, turned quickly, and padded away for the rest of the group. Willowpaw followed her mother quickly, still thinking hard about the interactions.

By the time they returned to camp, Willowpaw was quite tired, but yet her mind was still on the BatClan cats. As the warriors headed for their den, Willowpaw hurried to catch up with her mother, whom she had lost during their journey back through the tunnel. "Snowfern?" she mewed quietly.

Snowfern paused and turned to look at her. "Yes, little one?" Her eyes were soft and loving.

"Can I talk to you for a little bit?" the apprentice asked, trying to stop her anxiety from building.

"Of course." Wrapping her tail around Willowpaw, Snowfern led her daughter over to the edge of the clearing, where they settled down on the cold snow under the endless dark sky, twinkled with stars and the bright full moon. "What's wrong, Willowpaw?"

The apprentice hesitated in order to think. She looked out at the shadowed territories before her, at the steep drop below her to the distant moorland below. Forcing her mind away from the distractions, she instead looked at her paws and asked, "do you have any kin in BatClan?"

Snowfern let out a soft sigh. "Not really," she said softly. "I lost most of my kin rather young. My mother died when I was just over a moon old, and my older sister, who was barely a warrior at the time, raised me and my littermates instead. She didn't have brothers or sisters, but she had friends, and our father, too. My sister, Pinekit, passed away young, and my brother a few moons later. His name was Ravenpaw..."

A jolt went through Willowpaw's stomach. She had never even thought that her littermate might've been named after a lost kin member.

Snowfern seemed to notice her surprise. "I named Blossompaw for my mother," she said softly, with a quite certain disappointment in her eyes. "Blossomheart was sweet and kind--or at least, that's what I was told. She deserved to live many more moons..." She shook her head to clear it. "After that, I only really had my sister and my father. But after I moved to EchoClan, and Stonecoat and Shadefur were kits, my father... Hawkstar... he died, too."

"Hawkstar was your father?" *I had no idea she was a leader's kit...* No wonder she had been so sad when Dawnstar mentioned him...

"He was, and he was amazing. A good warrior, a good leader, a good father--he was the perfect cat. He died much too soon--saving the life of my sister..."

"Is she gone, too?" Willowpaw asked softly.

This sadness seemed much stronger--the agony in her eyes, the

memories hidden there; her love for her sister was obviously stronger than anything. "She always looked out for me, I thought she would always be there... But then she was gone, just a moon before you were born..."

So recent... Willowpaw pressed closer to her mother.

Snowfern was quiet for a moment. "Heronclaw, the cat Clovertail mentioned? He's the kit of my mother's sister, Whitebreeze. I guess, the only kin I have left outside EchoClan is Duskfang, Heronclaw's littermate--though I was never really that close to him, so he barely feels like kin..."

"I'm sorry," Willowpaw whispered, "for making you think of them all..."

"It's completely alright," Snowfern meowed quickly, giving her daughter a lick on her shoulder. "You deserve to know your history. But I think it's time to sleep now. Goodnight, Willowpaw." She gave the kit one more lick, then stood up and padded away softly.

Willowpaw stayed there for a little longer in order to think, despite her longing for sleep. She wished Acornstar's patrol would return already, despite the fact they had only been gone for a little over a quarter moon and probably had a lot more journey to go--she just wanted her family to come back, because she didn't want her mother to lose anyone else. What if Ravenpaw didn't come back, and once again Snowfern had to know that a Ravenpaw couldn't receive their full name?

Chapter Nineteen

Blossompaw clawed the moss before her in frustration.

"Now that's just wasteful," Oakcloud meowed calmly from where he sat the edge of the nursery, his kits playing around his paws with excited squeals.

"It's boring!" she growled in response, her tail lashing. When Mossrain let her out of the medicine cat's den, she expected to go back to training, but three dawns later she was still stuck in camp under the watchful eye of Oakcloud, who was even more infuriating than Maskdapple had been. Yes, Maskdapple had been annoyingly strict, but she could always manage to anger the she-cat if she tried hard enough. But no matter how much she crossed Oakcloud, the tom was calm and direct and never let her stray. "I should be training, I'm already far enough behind!"

"And who says you're not training?" Oakcloud questioned, flicking his tail so Stormkit could chase it with a squeal. Blossompaw forced back the urge to chase it herself--*you're not a kit anymore,* she reminded herself harshly. She needed to act strong, like Brookstar had told her too.

Do what Oakcloud says, you'll get out to the territory quicker, the she-cat had told her yesterday, but her frustration continued to build. Brookstar didn't have to deal with him, so she couldn't tell Blossompaw off for misbehaving, right?

She unhooked her claws from the moss and stared challengingly into Oakcloud's eyes. "I want to go hunting," she said firmly.

Oakcloud gave a soft blink. "So do I--such a shame, is it not? Finish up, the apprentices' den is next."

"I changed the moss yesterday!" she complained. "It's no fair!"

"Life isn't fair." He nodded to the moss for her to continue, then turned his eyes on his kits.

Blossompaw let out a soft growl, but continued to her work, changing the moss in Goldenpool's nest with uncaring actions. Most of it didn't even need to be switched, anyways--it was just to waste her time.

"I don't see why Goldenpool couldn't change her own moss!" Blossompaw growled as she finished, swiping the old moss away with an angry swipe of her paw. With excited squeals, the kits left Oakcloud behind to play with the scraps.

"She has kits to care for," Oakcloud answered, heading to his kits and rolling some of the moss into a tight ball. Hooking it with a claw, he sent it across the den, and the kits toppled over themselves trying to reach it first.

"Yet she isn't even here!" Blossompaw lashed her tail to gesture to the den, which, besides Oakcloud and the kits, was empty except for Dappletail sleeping in her nest.

"I offered to watch the kits while she visited the medicine cat's den," Oakcloud said.

"Once again, *she could've done this herself!* Mossrain doesn't need help." She clawed the ground. She just wanted to be out in the forest--she deserved as much, after being trapped for so long!

Oakcloud looked at her with a calm expression. "You know, now that I think about it, the nests warriors' den could use cleaning, as well--the *entire* warriors' den. I'll go ask the other apprentices to go out and collect some moss. I trust you'll stay here." The tom stood and left the den, his tail sweeping peacefully through the air.

No way *I'm cleaning the warriors' den, too!* she thought fiercely, shaking her coat. She went to the entrance and looked out into the clearing, waiting until Oakcloud's head disappeared into the apprentices' den to emerge from the nursery and race silently to the moorland entrance, rushing down the rocks. A small pain flared through her spine, but she forced herself to ignore it, keeping her

speed high until she touched down onto the snowy grass.

Gasping for breath, she struggled to calm herself. The cold air felt fresh and free down on the moor, and she took a few moments to calm her rushing heart before going forward at a smooth trot. Oakcloud couldn't stop her from hunting if he didn't know where she was. She reached the forest quickly and slunk into the darkness, shivering as the broken shadows enveloped her pelt.

She liked the forest much more than the moor, the towering trees that created a protective barrier around her making her feel safe and comforted. She lowered her nose to the earth, but the wonderful smells that used to surround her were muffled by the thick white snow. She realized, quite suddenly, that she hadn't been taught how to hunt in the snow.

"Well, I can teach myself," she decided, not liking how her voice echoed in the muted silence. Telling herself her shivering was only because the cold, the she-cat shook out her coat and headed forward, putting everything she had into searching for the scent of prey.

She didn't know how long she had been searching, but by the time she finally gave up, a strong pang of hunger gripped her stomach and she realized she had no idea where she was. She was still in EchoClan territory, she knew that much, but she couldn't scent the usual tellings of where things were.

Anxiety started to bubble in her stomach, and she started swinging her head around, trying to see if, maybe, she had missed something that told her where she was. Letting out a shaking breath, the apprentice turned and started to follow her pawsteps back.

"Took you long enough."

Blossompaw jumped, twisting around in search of where the voice came from. After a moment, snow fell from a delicate fern bush as Oakcloud appeared, coated in white powder. "You were watching me?" she growled, trying to hide the embarrassment prickling her fur.

"Since you left camp," he responded, sitting down in the thick snow in order to lick a paw, drawing it lazily over his ear. "I assumed you would sneak out if left alone, though I was hoping you would have the sense not to."

"It doesn't matter what I do, I'll be stuck in camp anyways!" she growled, lashing her tail.

"Actually, we were going to be hunting tomorrow, but since you decided to do it today, I assume you can wait a further quarter moon before leaving camp again--during which you will be watched constantly. Which is a shame, as I would rather be hunting for my Clan than watching a disobedient kit like *you*."

"I'm not a kit!" she insisted.

His eyes were cold. "Then why do you act like one?" He stood up, shaking snow from his coat. "We'll be heading back to camp."

"At least let me finish hunting!" she growled, flexing her claws.

"And spend the rest of today wandering in circles? No, thank you. After all, your likelihood of catching something is as high as my likelihood of waking up as a she-cat tomorrow."

Fury grew in Blossompaw's chest. "I would've found something soon enough!"

"Not with how you were hunting," he responded. "Smells are muffled by snow, it's almost impossible for even warriors to hunt using their nose. Instead, you use your *ears*. But if I was you, I would consider the possibility that your next chance to hunt will be after the snow has melted--maybe when the forest becomes anew, you will as well. Or, at least we can hope." He turned around and walked away on light paws. "Come along, Blossompaw, or you won't be eating until dawn."

Frustration boiled under the apprentice's fur, and for a moment she considered racing the other direction. But then she forced one paw after another after the tabby warrior, tail lashing through the air.

As she went along, curiosity continued to ebb away her anger, and

she decided to test what Oakcloud had told her. She perked her ears, raising her head and focusing on the forest. She heard their pawsteps and their breathing, the cracking of bare branches clicking together from the wind, the air twisting through the bushes, and the tiny scuffling of pawsteps under a fern bush not too far away.

She crouched, a small painful tingle running through her spine. She stalked toward the bush, but as she neared, the bushes trembled and she heard the mouse scuttling away. She leaped, slamming into the ferns as she tried to find it, but a heavy cloud of white surrounded her, and her face was lashed with branches. Hissing, she backed away, shaking her head to clear the snow off.

"Well, that was fun to watch," Oakcloud commented calmly. She looked at him crossly.

"Aren't you going to say what I did wrong?" she growled when he didn't say anything else.

He shrugged. "Should I?"

Frustration seared her pelt, and she flexed her claws again. "No, you shouldn't!" she decided. "I don't need your help!"

She stalked past him in the direction of camp. He caught up quickly, moving fast so he could get past her. She was angry that he wanted to be in front, but she did nothing to fight him, only because she didn't know where they were actually *going*.

"Your pawsteps," he said suddenly.

"What?" she meowed, too surprised to be angry.

"When hunting in snow, you have to extra careful of your pawsteps because the snow crunches when you walk on it. You have to step slowly and softly, making sure it's completely crushed before continuing, but if you crush it too fast your prey will hear and run." He didn't look back at her as he spoke, instead keeping his eyes forward on the forest.

Blossompaw didn't respond but instead just followed the tom silently. Soon the rocky side of the cliff appeared through the trees,

and she went up the rocks without saying anything. When she reached the clearing she found that it was empty, despite the fact it was past sunhigh. It seemed the Clan was either hunting or hiding in the warmth of their dens.

"You can spend the rest of the day in your den," Oakcloud told her. "You can eat after everybody else. I'll come tell you when that is."

"Fine," Blossompaw grumbled, padding to her den and slipping inside. It was clear of apprentices, and she was a little disappointed that Flamepaw wasn't there. The grumpy tom was easy to talk to, since they could talk bad about annoying, controlling warriors, as long as no one else was there to tell them off for it.

With a sigh, the young she-cat went to her nest and curled up, shivering as the cold moss touched her fur. She let calmness fill her, sinking into the moss and ignoring the pang of sadness that she didn't have anybody curled up with her. Slowly, her mind faded out, and she fell into sleep.

She woke in a familiar, yet very strange place--because it wasn't a place at all. She was surrounded by thick gray fog, hiding absolutely everything from her gaze. She couldn't feel anything under her paws, and nothing was in her scent glands except a slightly wet smell.

"Hello? Brookstar?" she called, pushing down the shiver that always ran up her spine when she came here.

"Blossompaw."

The apprentice turned around, seeing the familiar shape of her friend. She was surprisingly clear, despite the fog around them. Her beautiful thick gray fur was slightly transparent, but her dark blue eyes were as clear and stunning as ever. Her chest and paws, with sparkling white fur, were almost impossible to see.

"I'm sorry I snuck out of camp," Blossompaw began, but Brookstar gave a soft flick of her tail.

"I understand, young one," she said, walking forward and slipping around Blossompaw. The apprentice couldn't feel the warrior's coat but

felt a shiver of cold run through her. She turned to follow the she-cat's beautiful gaze. "Being trapped as such, I wouldn't be able to bear it. I travel the same place, unable to do anything but stay in my own mind, wishing to feel the sun on my pelt again."

"You should come visit me, sometime," Blossompaw said. "You could train me in the forest, teach me to hunt and fight better."

"I cannot." The she-cat gave a sad sigh and sat in the twisting fog. Blossompaw settled in front of the she-cat like they always did when they spoke. Brookstar was a good listener, always willing to take Blossompaw's problems on her shoulders with no judgment and good advice.

"But why? You visited me in the medicine cat's den. Don't you want to do it again?"

"Of course," Brookstar said sadly. "But StarClan saw me, and now some of their members are trying to track me down. I'm forced to flee constantly, living in fear of being found..."

"But you're trying to help them!" Blossompaw mewed, upset. "Can't you tell them that?"

"They wouldn't understand," Brookstar admitted. "Branchstar has warped their minds into thinking it was I who did wrong. Of course, I did things I regret, but the things he said I did..."

"I'll clear your name," Blossompaw promised. "When I'm leader, I'll show the Clans the good you did."

Relief glowed in Brookstar's eyes. "Thank you, Blossompaw. You're a good friend."

Friend. *Blossompaw loved the word. Brookstar was her friend. Her only friend. She understood the apprentice, knew what she was going through. After all, when Brookstar was a kit her mother had taken in the son of a dead queen, who grew to be Firebreeze, a killer medicine cat. Brookstar's mother had spent every moment she could with Firebreeze, smothering him with affection and ignoring Brookstar. Like Snowfern did with Ravenpaw...*

"When can we start training? Soon?" Blossompaw asked hopefully. Brookstar had kept to conversations while Blossompaw was healing, but maybe now that she was healed they could train?

"Soon," Brookstar promised. "But we cannot train here. The place we train, it's not ideal, but I hope you'll forgive me."

"I bet anywhere is better than here," Blossompaw soothed her worry. "This fog is creepy."

"You may not see it that way when I show you my home," Brookstar admitted, softly getting to her paws. "If you'll follow me." She started to walk into the fog, and Blossompaw hurried to stay by her side.

At first, they traveled through the blank whiteness, but then it started to get darker, shadowed by something she couldn't see. Ground began to touch her paws, and when she looked down she saw short dark grass beginning to appear around her paws. Everything was suddenly very dark, and when she looked up she found herself in a forest.

But it wasn't a normal forest. The trees had dark, harsh wood, and rose higher than she thought was normal. Their leaves were so thick that she couldn't even see the sky, making the shadows so deep she could only see a few fox lengths in each direction. Brookstar looked around sadly. In this darkness, it was incredibly hard to see her pelt, the transparent hue of her fur making her blend in.

"You live here*?" Blossompaw whispered, fluffing her coat fearfully. She felt cold, like she was being watched. She looked around, but nothing appeared from the shadows.*

"Yes." Brookstar's voice had so much depression in it Blossompaw thought the she-cat was going to collapse. "That visit in the medicine cat's den was the only time I felt the wind on my pelt and saw the moon shine. I wished I could've gone out, but StarClan would've seen..." She cast her gaze down. "My only wish is to feel the sun on my fur, at least one last time..."

"I'm so sorry." Blossompaw pressed against the she-cat, surprised to find her fur now felt more real. It wasn't warm nor was she solid, but Blossompaw swore she could feel the softness of her fur, and was that

the she-cat's breath ruffling her whiskers? "Does that mean you can't visit me in the territory?"

"I can," Brookstar meowed. "Like the cats who spoke in your head. I can see what you're doing, know what you're thinking, but I won't actually be there."

"That's okay!" Blossompaw meowed quickly. "You can still help me, tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"I hope so," Brookstar meowed, leaning closer to give Blossompaw a lick behind the ear. Blossompaw felt her fur move, a wet tingle on her skin. Brookstar really was *there.*

"You feel much more real here," Blossompaw told her.

"Because it's my home," Brookstar sighed. "It's where my soul lies. My spirit can join you on your journey, but my soul, my body, must stay here. That's why we'll train here, so we can interact with each other." To show this to Blossompaw, she nudged her body into Blossompaw's shoulder, and the apprentice found herself stumbling away.

"Wow!" Blossompaw whispered, and she went back to Brookstar and shoved herself against the she-cat. Brookstar stumbled away with a purr.

"Good job," she meowed. "When someone pushes you, you always push back harder," Brookstar told her. "Don't let any cat undermined you. Go back to your Clan, now, I'll visit you soon."

"Goodbye, Brookstar!" Blossompaw said quickly as the forest began to disappear around her.

"Goodbye, Blossompaw."

Author's Note

So as some of you may know, Ravenpaw is actually based off of my real-life cat, Jinx. I'm sad to say that, two weeks ago, Jinx actually disappeared. He's been gone before, but never for this long. We posted online on Nextdoor, an app where you can post to neighborhoods around you, but there's been no sign. We've accepted that Jinx, as he was getting on in age, most likely went away to pass on. It's really sad, and hard to think about, but I won't stop writing Clouded Skies, since it makes me feel like a part of Jinx is still actually around.

Though, better news-- we had been thinking about getting a kitten for some time, and yesterday I found two kittens online that I felt connected with, and now they will be joining our household in a few hours. I'm quite excited for this, and it's quite possible the two will join the ranks of EchoClan in honor of their real-life counterparts once I can find a good place for them.

Thanks, and I hope you continue to enjoy the story.

[image]

[image]

Chapter Twenty

Willowpaw hauled herself up the last of the pathway into the clearing, holding her mouse softly in her jaws. The cold wind ruffled her pelt, making her shiver in discomfort. Pebblepeak shot her a sympathetic glance, though said nothing because of the blackbird filling his mouth. His coat, thick and warm like his father's, had protected him from the cold.

Maskdapple, the third member of their hunting patrol, ran her tail along Pebblepeak's side. "I'm going to go rest," she said softly, heading for the warriors' den on slightly unsteady paws.

Willowpaw had noticed Maskdapple was slow during the patrol, missing the leap for a squirrel and failing the run to catch it afterward. She hoped the warrior wasn't getting sick--the Clan was weak enough as is, with so many warriors gone. A flame of worry wiggled in her stomach as she pictured her kin sleeping in an unfamiliar forest, surrounded by cold snow and strange trees, but she forced it away as she headed for the fresh-kill pile.

The mist from the waterfall was especially cold, stinging her pelt as she went past. Pebblepeak let her pass to nudge her mouse into the hollowed curve of the stone wall where they stored their prey. There was only a few pieces there, only a rabbit and two voles. Pebblepeak set the blackbird down, coughing briefly on a feather before spitting it out.

"Bring this to the nursery and remove the feathers, then spread it amongst Goldenpool, Dappletail, and the kits," Pebblepeak meowed. "I'm going to ask Mossrain if he can check up on Maskdapple when he gets the chance."

"Okay," Willowpaw mewed, taking the blackbird and heading over to the den. The wings brushed against her chest and legs and for a

moment she almost tripped, but she made to the warm envelopment soon enough, shivering as the milky scent filled her.

"Prey!" Stormkit stumbled over and rammed herself into Willowpaw's shoulder, while Dustkit blocked her way in order to grab a wing and tug on it.

"Let us bring it over!" Heatherkit pleaded, reaching up to grab the neck of the bird with her small claws. She tried to pull it down, but Willowpaw kept a firm hold and continued on. Heatherkit squealed as she fell over and was left behind, while Dustkit excitedly tried to keep a hold of the wing as they went.

"Leave her alone, little ones," Goldenpool purred, but the kits didn't seem to pay attention. Stormkit tripped over Heatherkit, and the two instantly began to tussle. Maple padded calmly along at Willowpaw's side, eyes shining with excitement but also patience, while Dustkit led the way.

When Willowpaw reached Goldenpool's nest and sat down the bird, Dustkit spat out the wing and proclaimed, "I brought it all by myself, Goldenpool!"

She purred, and Willowpaw joined her. She liked the silly tom, and she raised a paw nudge his shoulder. With a squeak, the kit threw himself onto the ground, then scrambled up and tried to attack her shoulder. Tiny, sharp claws dug into Willowpaw's shoulder, and suddenly the kit was climbing onto her back.

"Badger ride!" he demanded.

"Dustkit, you need to *ask,*" Goldenpool scolded.

"Badger ride?" he asked hopefully.

"I need to de-feather the blackbird," Willowpaw explained, trying to withhold her purr of amusement.

"I can do it!" Maple mewled, jumping toward the bird and gripping a feather in her mouth. "But I want a ride, too!" she added in a muffled voice as she tugged the feather free.

"Alright, whoever helps remove feathers can have a ride," Willowpaw decided.

In an instant, Stormkit and Heatherkit stopped their attacking and raced for the bird. Stormkit didn't stop in time, and she tripped over the body and tumbled away.

Dustkit let out a *mrrow* of amusement. "Do it again!" he told his sister.

Laughing, Willowpaw swung around, letting her legs fly wide with each lumbering step. Dustkit squealed and dug his claws in. It hurt, but Willowpaw ignored the pain and let the kit enjoy himself.

By the time she forced Stormkit off her shoulders by grabbing her scruff and dragging her onto the mossy ground, Willowpaw was ready to collapse from exhaustion. The kits had done a surprisingly good job on removing the feathers, and each time one kit finished with a badger ride they got to enjoy their piece of prey.

Mewling with resentment about being forced off, Stormkit stomped to her nest and sniffed sadly at her prey, then she mewled, gave a little shiver of excitement, and started in on her food with vigor.

Rolling her eyes at the boisterous little kit, Willowpaw wished goodbye to Goldenpool and Dappletail and left the den, instantly shivering at the icy winds that buffered her coat. The sun had gone down quite a bit, and all the hunting patrols seemed to have returned. Cats were settled in the clearing, talking softly while sharing prey.

The other apprentices were settled in front of the den, and Willowpaw headed over. She scented Blossompaw inside the den, and guessed she was sleeping--perhaps she was in trouble. Featherpaw and Firepaw gave soft mews of greeting as Willowpaw settled down, while Flamepaw, who was sat a little away, said nothing, eyes on the half of a squirrel he had split with Firepaw.

"Here, I saved this for you." Featherpaw nosed a mouse closer to Willowpaw, licking vole blood from her jaws.

"Thanks," the young apprentice said, reaching a paw to drag the mouse closer. She couldn't help but notice the dull look still in Featherpaw's eyes, but it had been getting better these past few days. With Frostfall gone, Snowfern had taken over Featherpaw's training, while Grayblaze had--quite unwillingly--taken Flamepaw for Silverstrike, and Willowpaw was hopeful her mother would help her friend out of her dark sadness.

They fell into silence as they ate, and Willowpaw found her mind wandering outside of the territory. She hadn't seen Rowanpaw since before the Gathering. She had been trying to find a good time to go see him, but Pebblepeak had kept her busy. She looked up to the sky. The sun was setting, but was still relatively high. She had no more patrols for the day, and Pebblepeak looked comfortable across the clearing, laying down with Brightflower, Petaldust, Snowfern, and Oakcloud. Thorntail and Grayblaze were both resting by themselves, while Maskdapple was nowhere to be seen, possibly in the medicine cat's den.

Willowpaw was tired and sore from hunting and playing with the kits, but she knew she wouldn't have a better chance for quite a while. So she got up, stretching and groaning as her cramped muscles loosened.

"Going somewhere?" Firepaw asked.

"I, uh, want to keep hunting," Willowpaw said quickly.

Flamepaw looked over. "You give that excuse to Pebblepeak, he'll follow you when you leave," the tom growled.

"What?" Willowpaw responded, confused.

"Every cat has already eaten," Featherpaw reminded her. "Maybe not to their fill, but enough that they can wait until tomorrow. You'd have no reason to go out again."

"What if I was hunting for myself? Like I wanted more?" Willowpaw gave up her pretense, hoping the more experienced apprentices would help her.

"He'll either tell you to wait or follow," Firepaw answered.

"Best bet is to say you're nest is uncomfortable," Featherpaw mewed, looking a tad more excited than usual. "We don't have any fresh moss, so you would have to leave to get some. Tell him you'll be back soon, and hope whatever you're doing doesn't take too long."

"Keep it short," Firepaw meowed. "If you take too long he'll come looking. Where *are* you going, anyway?"

"Nowhere," Willowpaw said stiffly.

"Don't say that to Pebblepeak," Featherpaw advised with a brief flare of amusement, which died quickly. She gave a hard blink and a small shake of her head, then added, "I know of some moss that grows quite well by the river. Tell Pebblepeak you're going there. And leave soon, it's getting late."

"Thanks," Willowpaw sighed, overly grateful to the other apprentices.

"Get going," Firepaw meowed. "Let us know how it goes."

"Thanks again." She flicked her tail in goodbye and walked slowly over to her mentor, knowing it would be suspicious if she rushed over. "Pebblepeak?" she called, hoping she wasn't going to interrupt their conversation and cause him to say no.

But his eyes were light and curious when he turned to look at her. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"I don't have enough moss in my nest," she explained. "I was wondering if I could go out to get more? Featherpaw told me of a great spot by the river in the forest."

Oakcloud let out an annoyed sigh. "Blossompaw's doing, I bet," he meowed. "She must've not cared to finish the other day."

Snowfern lashed her tail. "Honestly! I don't know where she gets it from!"

"Do you need someone to go with you?" Pebblepeak asked.

"No, thank you." Luckily, Willowpaw had been ready for that question even with her old plan. "I... I kind've want to be alone, for a little bit."

Snowfern's eyes instantly glowed with sympathy. "I miss them, too, Willowpaw," she meowed softly. "But they'll be back soon."

Just as she had hoped. She felt bad letting the cats believe she was missing her family--she did, of course, but it was still lying--but she hid her guilt and dropped her head slightly.

"Just be home soon," Pebblepeak told her softly.

"I'll try," Willowpaw promised, turning and hurrying away for the forest entrance. Featherpaw caught her eye, and Willowpaw was glad to see a gleam in her gaze.

The sun had gone down a little by the time Willowpaw was crossing through the unclaimed territory, sending shadows out to darken the snow. The snow crunched under her pawsteps, an icy chill that ran up her legs. She could see her breath as she walked, but it was a nice brief warmth as she walked through the small cloud she created with each fall of her chest.

By the time she reached the small clearing, she still hadn't run into Rowanpaw, but she could see pawprints heading into the cave. She approached slowly, not wanting to scare him. "Rowanpaw?" she called.

There was a few moments of silence, then familiar amber eyes appeared in the darkness, and the young tom emerged. He had obviously been eating better, with his sides slowly filling out, but his fur was still clumped and dirty. It looked like he hadn't bothered to clean himself since he left his Clan.

"You came back," he said. His voice sounded a little stronger, but also hoarse, as if he hadn't spoken for some time; probably since the last time she had come, over a quarter moon ago.

"Sorry it took so long," she said softly.

He gave a small shrug, then turned and disappeared back into the cave. Willowpaw hesitated for a moment, then she hurried after him, slipping into the darkness. She was instantly relieved that the wind was no longer chilling her pelt, though the stone was quite cold on her pads. The tom padded back to a large nest he had made, spread out over the ground to cover quite a large area. She sat delicately on the edge of it, while he crouched down in the middle.

He looked slightly uneasy, his tail tip flicking softly. He stared at her in silence, not even trying to start a conversation.

Swallowing, Willowpaw began the only way she knew she could, "I saw your brother, at the Gathering."

Instantly, a bright light flared in his eyes. His head rose and his ears flickered up to attention. "How is he?" he asked. "Did he say anything about a kit? Hopekit?"

That must be Emberheart's kit, Willowpaw thought. Both Blazepaw and Dawnstar had mentioned her, just not by name. "He's doing okay," she meowed softly. "And Hopekit's okay, too." She hoped that was true--she knew the kit was alive, at least, by what Dawnstar said.

Rowanpaw relaxed, looking much calmer than before.

Willowpaw looked around for a moment, not knowing what to say. "This is a nice den," she decided finally.

He almost seemed to wince, and he leaned down to lick his chest, as if cleaning a wound. "A cat died here," he muttered.

Willowpaw perked her ears in surprise. "Who?" she asked in shock.

He was quiet for a moment. "Violet," he said quietly.

"Rain's mate?" she said before she could stop herself.

He looked up quickly. "What?"

Willowpaw swallowed and explained, "We found two kits on our border, and a little afterward my brothers found Rain searching for

them. He and his daughter are apart of our Clan, now--the tomkit passed away, though."

Rowanpaw was quiet for a few moments, then murmured to his paws, "my Clanmate and I found Violet being attacked by a fox. We couldn't save her, but we saved the kits. I decided to give them to your Clan. Thought you could help them better."

So he saved Maple's life? Willowpaw felt a glow of respect for the young tom. He was a good cat, but he was tortured by the darkness of his past. Without saying anything, Willowpaw softly got to her paws and padded over to him. His fur bristled softly, and he watched her with a darkening expression.

But she just sat down next to him and softly began to clean his fur. She felt him stiffen, his tail lashing, but then, once again, he started to relax. He said nothing as her tongue rasped over his fur. A sour taste quickly developed in Willowpaw's mouth, but she ignored it, continuing on until his fur was brushed back and clean.

She sat back silently, licking her muzzle to get rid of some of the taste. She knew that, by now, she had been gone for much too long. She would probably get in trouble. "I need to go," she said softly. "I'll try to visit longer next time," she added when his eyes snapped to hers with obvious anxiety.

He quickly lowered his eyes. "Yeah, whatever."

Willowpaw wasn't sure about him yet. He wasn't as hostile as before, but she didn't think it was a mark of them getting closer--she was pretty sure he was just too tired to care. She wanted to stay longer, to truly use the opportunity to learn more about him and strengthen a bond to help him, but she didn't think he would welcome her yet. And, she needed to be home before she was noticed. She stood up and started walking away, then paused and looked back. "Do you think I could borrow some moss?"

Willowpaw went back into EchoClan territory with a ball of moss trapped in her jaws. The moon had risen quite a bit while she was gone, with only a faint orange coming from where the sun was setting. The moon was still quite full, sending broken streaks of

light through the bare tree branches.

But she hadn't gone too far from the Thunderpath when she brushed through some snowy undergrowth and saw a familiar cat sitting in front of her. The gray tabby licked one of his white paws and drew it over his ear.

"Curious," Pebblepeak meowed. "When you said 'river in the forest', I expected you to go to the one by the SageClan border. Tell me, is there another river in the territory I don't know about?"

Willowpaw quietly dropped the moss, saying nothing. It was obvious enough Pebblepeak knew where she went.

Pebblepeak's tail lashed in frustration. "Do you know how worried I was?" he growled. "I came looking after you had been gone for too long, expecting to find you sleeping by the river, instead you went out of the territory!" His eyes glowed in frustration. "What were you doing out there? Do you know how dangerous it is?"

"I was safe, honestly!" she meowed quickly. "If anything came for me I could've climbed a tree!"

"And what if your attacker could climb a tree, too? What if that apprentice we saw the other day decided to attack you or something?" In an instant, realization came to his eyes. "You visited him!"

Willowpaw scuffed the snow. "Only twice," she said softly.

"Twice?" Pebblepeak said in shock. "Willowpaw, he could've attacked you!"

"He wouldn't!" Willowpaw said quickly. "I saw it, the first time we met him on the dawn patrol. He wasn't angry, he was just sad. I thought he could use a friend..." She realized how naive she sounded, but she was right either way.

"Willowpaw," Pebblepeak meowed, his mew suddenly soft and caring, as if he was trying to withhold his anger. "You can't be friends with somebody outside the Clan. It... It causes you to break in two." There was a strong pain in his eyes. "It divides your loyalty,

makes you question everything."

"I don't care," Willowpaw told him firmly. "I'm not doing it for myself. I'm doing it for him. He needs someone."

Pebblepeak let out a soft sigh. "Willowpaw, I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I don't think he will," Willowpaw was adamant. "I spoke to his brother, at the Gathering. He's really sad. He lost a lot of cats close to him, and now he's lost his Clan, too. His brother can't visit him, but I can. I can keep him connected to his home."

Pebblepeak scratched the snow. "Willowpaw, what can I say to get you to stop going out there?"

"Nothing," she answered.

He sighed in annoyance and was quiet for some moments. Finally, he said, "you can't let this interrupt your training."

Willowpaw was actually quite shocked he had agreed. "Really?" she asked excitedly, her tail waving happily.

"Yes, just don't let the Clan know," he ordered. "You can visit him once a quarter moon, *with me*."

"With you?" Disappoint flamed in Willowpaw's belly.

"I'm not coming with you, don't worry," Pebblepeak meowed. "I'll bring you to the Gathering Hollow and wait there. We'll go at sunhigh and you'll come back before it begins to set. We'll have plenty of time to hunt and practice before heading home."

"Thank you, Pebblepeak!" Unable to withhold her excitement, Willowpaw rushed forward and brushed herself under his chin.

"Come on, let's get back."

Going back to pick up her moss, Willowpaw hurried after her mentor.

"Tomorrow you'll join your sister with cleaning up the camp. We'll

go out and collect some moss for her," Pebblepeak told her.

Willowpaw flicked her tail in acknowledgment, then silently continued along the young warrior's side.

Chapter Twenty-One

Boulderclaw appeared two dawns later, just as Willowpaw was beginning to settle down after a hunting patrol with Pebblepeak, Snowfern, and Featherpaw. Her friend noticed the tom's appearance first, nudging Willowpaw and meowing loudly, "look! Boulderclaw's back!"

Heads raised all around the clearing, and the only cat to get to Boulderclaw before Willowpaw did was Snowfern. The white and black she-cat curled around her mate, hiding her forehead under his chin with a thick purr in her throat. Willowpaw joined her mother in pressing against her father's thick, warm coat. She spotted Blossompaw a little off, but the apprentice just sat and wrapped her tail around her paws. She had a sad look in her eyes, as if she wanted to join the reunion but something was holding her back.

"Have you found Acornstar?" Eagleclaw asked hopefully as she approached.

"Where is Silverstrike?" Maskdapple hurried over, still with that tired look on her. She was still doing her warrior duties, so Willowpaw assumed Mossrain had given her the all clear. After all, he wouldn't put his own mother in danger. "He's okay, right?"

"He's fine," he soothed the worried she-cat. "He and the others are still searching for Acornstar. I returned early," he explained.

"Why? Is something wrong?" Eagleclaw looked anxious.

"Not exactly." Boulderclaw looked back to the rock path and gave a soft call. After a few moments, unfamiliar cat scent fluttered to Willowpaw, and three young cats emerged. They looked her age, one a tom with gray tabby fur and mismatched green and amber eyes, and the other two brown tabby she-cats.

"Who are these cats?" Eagleclaw asked in confusion.

"Intruders," Grayblaze growled, but he was silenced by a hiss from Oakcloud.

"We found them on our journey," Boulderclaw explained, turning his eyes to Snowfern. Willowpaw looked at her mother, and was shocked by what she saw. The she-cat was completely frozen, fur on end and eyes wide, tail limp and ears drooping sideways.

"You..." she whispered, unable to speak.

"Snowfern?" Eagleclaw said softly. "Snowfern, are you alright?"

But the she-cat wasn't paying attention. Slowly, she tore her gaze from the strangers and looked at Boulderclaw. "Are they...?" she croaked.

"You would know better than I," Boulderclaw murmured.

"Boulderclaw--" Eagleclaw began, but the tom sent her a soft, silent glance, and the she-cat went quiet.

Snowfern stepped closer to the newcomers, who looked quite uneasy from her gaze. "Who are your parents?" she whispered with a strange intensity. "What are their names?"

"Robin and Rock," the gray tabby responded. "Who are you?"

Snowfern let out a soft, unsteady breath. "Sn-Snowfern," she breathed. "Do you recognize that name?"

They all shook their heads. Snowfern's shoulders sagged for a moment, then went up again.

"Wh-what about Hawkstar? Have you heard of him?"

Willowpaw now realized something extremely important was going on. Her mother wasn't just rambling, it had a purpose--after all, why else would she bring up her father?

"Our brother was named Hawk," murmured the light brown tabby. Snowfern's eyes locked onto hers, and she seemed to shrink.

"And your names?" she whispered.

"Rock," meowed the gray tabby.

"Pine," said the darker tabby.

"Lark," meowed the last.

Snowfern's head dropped as if she no longer had the strength to hold it up. "Rock," she murmured, "after Rockfire, the cat she loved most; Pine, after her sister Pinepaw, who herself was named for the pine trees of the territory; Lark, after the first piece of prey she fed my littermates and I when we were kits... And Hawk, after her father... who died protecting her..."

Realization hit Willowpaw and Eagleclaw at the same time.

"These are... These are Robinstrike's kits?" Eagleclaw asked softly.

Snowfern gave a tiny nod. "You knew our mother?" Rock whispered, eyes wide. His sisters seemed shocked into silence.

Snowfern gave another silent nod. "She was my sister..." she breathed.

Willowpaw finally understood. Snowfern had told her Robinstike was "gone", and the apprentice had presumed she meant dead. But no, she had meant missing. Robinstrike had birthed kits outside the Clan, and despite all odds, they had made their way back to their kin.

"Do you know for sure?" Rock asked, looking anxiously excited.

Snowfern nodded slowly. "There's no other possibility. You... You look just like your father, and Lark..." She looked at the smallest of the three. "Your resemblance to your mother...It makes me remember my days as a kit... Your mother was the greatest cat I have ever known..."

Suddenly, she whipped around to face Eagleclaw with such intensity that the deputy took a step back. "You'll let them join, right? I'm the only kin they have left!"

Eagleclaw hesitated. "You know that's not completely true, Snowfern. Dawnstar and Sandflight should know they are here."

"Of course!" Snowfern sounded insulted. "I will tell them myself, but... I can't lose her again, and BatClan... They don't have the strength to take three untrained apprentices."

"We're not untrained!" Rock objected. "We've had to survive alone, fighting to live every day."

A deep, dark look took over Snowfern's vision, and she slowly turned to look at the young cats. "Where... Where *are* your parents...?"

It was obvious by her voice she already knew the answer. It seemed Boulderclaw knew, too, because he softly moved to her side to comfort her.

"Our father died before we were born," Rock muttered softly. "Our mother... three-quarters of a moon ago..."

Without warning, Snowfern collapsed onto the ground. The pain radiating through her body was painful even to Willowpaw. The apprentice went forward and pressed against her mother, licking her behind the ear like the she-cat did whenever Willowpaw was upset.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Snowfern," Eagleclaw murmured softly.

The she-cat slowly turned her broken gaze to her deputy. "Don't make me lose them..."

Eagleclaw's eyes were sympathetic, and she ran a soft tail along Snowfern's spine over Willowpaw's back. "Dawnstar must be informed first. If she wants the kits, we have no right to keep them from her. But if she agrees to let them live here, I will allow them safety for the rest of their days as EchoClan cats... No matter what Acornstar says when she returns," she added after a moment.

"We're not kits!" Rock said defiantly, and Eagleclaw turned to look at him. "Don't we get a choice of where we go?"

"Of course," Eagleclaw soothed. "But that can only be decided after you meet with Dawnstar. I will lead a patrol--"

"No." With shaking legs, Snowfern rose herself to her paws. "Thank you, Eagleclaw, but this is for me to do. Alone," she added when the she-cat began to respond. "I will bring them to the border and ask Dawnstar to meet."

"Snowfern, I must insist you bring someone with you," Eagleclaw meowed.

Snowfern hesitated, then meowed. "Willowpaw will join me. This meeting should be for kin only."

Willowpaw stood instantly as her mother turned to Boulderclaw, rubbing under his chin. "I'll be waiting for you to return," he murmured.

Eagleclaw didn't seem to know what to say, so she just dipped her head in acceptance. "Good luck, Snowfern."

"Thank you." Snowfern gave a respectful nod, then looked to the three outsiders. "Let's... I'll take you to your other kin..."

Willowpaw followed her mother as she led the way down the rocks into the forest, the three young cats in front of her.

"So, we're meeting Dawnstar and Sandflight, right? Those were their names?" Lark asked as they started through the forest.

"Yes. Dawnstar is the mother of your father Rockfire, and Sandflight is his sister. Dawnstar is the leader of BatClan," she added, "and Sandflight is their medicine cat."

"Boulderclaw told us about Clans!" Pine mewed excitedly. "And Ravenpaw helped Lark with her injured leg." She nodded to her sister, who jumped ahead a few paces to stretch out her back leg, revealing the healing scratches there.

"I fell into some thorns!" she said proudly.

"Ravenpaw is a great medicine cat," Snowfern said softly, pride

glowing in her eyes.

Willowpaw felt a flash of longing for her brother to come back, but she knew he was keeping the patrol safe. "I'm sure you'll be great apprentices," she told the young cats. "Wherever you decide to live."

"What's the difference between EchoClan and BatClan?" Pine asked curiously, sniffing at a fern momentarily.

"Well, EchoClan lives here, in the forest and the moor," Snowfern explained. "BatClan is in the marsh, under the protection of a pine forest."

"You said BatClan doesn't have the strength to take three new apprentices," Rock said as he padded along. Willowpaw cast a glance at the tom. He walked with a high head and a confident step, despite facing such an unknowing future. "What did you mean by that?"

Snowfern hesitated, her step faltering for a moment. "Well, BatClan is a little different than the others. Their territory is smaller, and it has less prey. This causes their cats to be weaker..." her mew broke, and it seemed to be quite difficult for her to keep her paws moving. "They are starving," she said abruptly. "Some cats... they don't end up surviving. It is quite possible the two other Clans, SageClan and CrowClan, will share some of their territory, but BatClan is still in dire need of strong new warriors."

"So they could use us, right?" Lark asked.

"Maybe," Snowfern murmured. "But by the time you were able to truly make a difference, it's possible you would be too weak to help."

"Couldn't we live here for a few moons, *then* go over there?" Pine asked.

"No, I don't think so," Snowfern sighed. "The Clans... They prefer to live separately from the others, not relying on help. When you chose a Clan today... You won't be able to have loyalty to the other."

"But you must be from BatClan, right?" Rock meowed. "That's where Robinstrike was from, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's where I was born, but I fell in love with Boulderclaw, and under a rare exception I was allowed to join EchoClan because of Eagleclaw's kindness."

"But you were raised in BatClan, so surely you still have some amount of loyalty?" Rock pressed.

"Of course," Snowfern responded instantly. "But EchoClan is my home now, it has been for some time, and my loyalty will favor them without fail. It's where I raised my kits, and where I plan to die."

Willowpaw didn't want to think of her mother dying--it sent a deep darkness through her body, and she shivered in fear. As if she felt her daughter's displeasure, the she-cat looked over her shoulder at the young apprentice.

"Don't worry, I don't plan on dying for some time yet," she soothed.

They walked in comfortable silence until they reached the Old Thunderpath, where Snowfern hesitated in order to think. "They won't have a border patrol for some time," she murmured to herself. Then she flicked her tail for the apprentices to follow. "Stay close," she ordered. "And don't hunt anything."

The four young cats followed Snowfern into the pine forest. The trees were tall and the undergrowth thin and scarce, with no sign of prey wherever Willowpaw looked. She perked her ears and listened, but there was no rustling of ferns, or the scrape of bark. The forest almost seemed...dead.

Then a faint sound came to her ears. Pawsteps.

"There's a patrol coming," Willowpaw meowed softly.

"I know," Snowfern murmured, and Willowpaw realized they were heading straight toward the sound.

Willowpaw saw them from quite far off. Two cats, one a bushy-

furred black she-cat and the other a brown tom apprentice, though he looked close to a warrior's size. Snowfern let out a meow to inform them of her location, and they both instantly looked over.

"Snowfern!" the black she-cat gasped, hurrying over with a small stumble. Her apprentice followed after her, looking slightly more guarded.

"Hello, Leafpelt," Snowfern greeted, and the she-cats touched noses.

"What are you doing here? Is everything oka--" she broke off as she spotted Rock, standing slightly in front of his sisters with fur slightly bushed as if he was ready to protect them if anything happened. Leafpelt seemed completely caught off guard by the sight of the tom. "You..."

"Leafpelt," Snowfern said softly, getting the she-cat's attention. "Will you please go get Dawnstar and Sandflight? I... Really need to talk to them."

Leafpelt looked back at Rock for a moment, then she gave a slow nod. "Carppaw," she meowed to her apprentice. "Come along. Snowfern, uh--"

"We'll go back to wait by the border," Snowfern told them.

"Yes." Leafpelt nodded, cast one more look at Rock, then turned and hurried away. Carppaw cast them a quick glance then rushed after his mentor.

"Come along," she told the four cats, and they all went quietly back to the border. Willowpaw was glad to escape the sharp, sappy scent that had surrounded her in the pine woods, and took in the sweet fern scent gladly. Snowfern sat quietly on the Thunderpath, and the others joined her.

"What was our mother like?" Lark asked unexpectedly, looking at Snowfern with a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

Snowfern hesitated for a moment, memories flaring in her eyes. "She was strong," she said finally. "She always stood up for what she believed in, even if it went against the Clan's standings. She always

thought we could get stronger if we tried harder..."

"I remember her being really determined," Rock murmured, running his paw through the snow with ears flattened in embarrassment.

"She was," Snowfern whispered back. "She never backed down--it actually got her in trouble quite a few times..." The softest purr rumbled in the she-cat's throat. "Her entire life she looked after me, wanting to keep me safe. I'm glad that she finally got to live for herself, at least for a little while..."

Before she could say anything else, thrumming pawsteps came to their ears, and Willowpaw looked into BatClan territory to see Leafpelt returning with Dawnstar, Sandflight, and her apprentice Carppaw.

The cats skidded to a stop on the other side of the Old Thunderpath, and Snowfern stood to walk over. Willowpaw and the loner littermates followed her. Lark looked scared, Pine curious, and Rock determined and standing tall.

"Leafpelt said..." the leader breathed, "but I'd never... I don't understand."

"Robinstrike had them outside the Clan," Snowfern explained softly. "On the patrol."

"But why wouldn't she return?" Dawnstar murmured. "Why wouldn't Rockfire? Or Stoneshadow?" An unbearable sadness glowed in the she-cat's eyes.

"I don't know," Snowfern said softly.

"Mother never mentioned a Clan," Rock meowed. Dawnstar's eyes seemed to weaken even more, and she stared at the tom like he was the meaning of her entire existence. Sandflight, too, seemed heartbreakingly sad, memories crashing in her eyes like a storm. "She barely mentioned Father, too."

Dawnstar wavered, having to sidestep to keep herself up. "He... He didn't raise you?" she asked softly.

Rock shook his head. "He died before we were born. Mother only ever said one thing about his death--"

"She said it was the day she lost everything and everyone," Pine cut in quietly. Rock nodded with a gleam of sadness in his eyes.

Dawnstar looked to her paws, tail limp in the snow. She suddenly looked very, very small.

"What about Robinstrike?" Sandflight whispered, looking anxiously upset. "She's... She's not gone, is she?"

Lark and Pine looked at their paws, and Sandflight gave a little mewl, like a lost kit.

"But... She never came to me... Why wouldn't she come to me?"

"She died saving us..." Rock murmured. "A fox attacked us, and she took its attention so we could get away. But seeing her get attacked, we couldn't just hide like kits..."

"We went back," Pine finished for her brother, who had been struggling to get out each word, "fought off the fox. But she... Mother..." She broke off, but they didn't need to say anymore.

"They've come for a Clan, Dawnstar," Snowfern murmured, wrapping her tail around Lark, who had kept her head down the entire time. "They've come for a home. We need to decide where it's at."

Dawnstar was quiet for a moment. "SageClan and CrowClan both agreed to give us territory," the leader murmured. "But for moons, we will still be weak, and we have so many kits to feed." She raised her broken eyes to Snowfern, her shoulders hunched and her ears drooping. "I want to take them to BatClan so badly," she murmured. "To raise them how I raised their father... But it wouldn't be right. To force them to suffer for moons until our strength was up... They have fought every day, they don't deserve to do that anymore... Snowfern, raise them in EchoClan, make them the great warriors I know they can be, just like their parents..."

"Of course, Dawnstar," Snowfern murmured, her tail still tight

around Lark. "I promise I will take care of them."

"Thank you, Snowfern," Dawnstar murmured. "Thank you for everything."

Originally, the parenthood of the kits wasn't actually going to be directly revealed until Robinstrike's Fate, a special edition I'm slowly writing, but I decided that wouldn't fit with Snowfern's character to keep silent about it if she even had the slightest thought of the possibility. I will still be writing Robinstrike's Fate alongside my other two special editions, Acornstar's Misery and Leafkit's Agony, and it will be very slow, as when I write in the past I try to be very careful.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"We must be just a day or two behind her," Frostfall meowed as the sun started to set on a cold day, sending shadows streaking through the forest. Her and Silverstrike had been leading the patrol at a steady pace, and it seemed they were finally closing the final stretch of distance.

"We'll keep moving for a while longer," Silverstrike decided, pausing for a moment to scratch behind his ear. "Hopefully we'll find her in the next few dawns, if we move fast enough."

Ravenpaw noticed the tom was still limping slightly on his forepaw. All the other patrol members had healed from their wounds, but the constant moving had stopped the senior warrior's paw from getting better, though the snow kept the tom's wound clean of infection, as well as the occasional stalk of marigold or horsetail--Ravenpaw would like dried oak much more, but in leaf-bare it was almost impossible to come by.

As he continued on, he sensed a strange uneasiness in the air, and realized after a little while that it was coming from Rain, who was walking a little behind the group. No one else seemed to have noticed, with Jaypaw intent on listening to a story from Stonecoat and Shadefur, who talked and laughed with their fur brushing, and Silverstrike was intent on watching Frostfall sniff out the trail.

Ravenpaw let his pawsteps slow until he was walking with the lonely tom, letting the rest of the patrol draw forward slightly. "Are you okay?" the apprentice asked softly, hoping that the tom would be honest if no one could overhear.

"No," he murmured truthfully. "I've traveled this forest before." He looked to his right, where Ravenpaw knew the Old Thunderpath lay just out of sight, hidden by thin leaf-bare undergrowth. "MothClan territory... It's close. Just a little away from the other side of the path." Fear twisted in his mew. "I dread to imagine what would

happen if Acornstar runs into a patrol... Or if we do."

"We could fight them off, right?" Ravenpaw asked.

"Maybe," Rain muttered. "Depending on who was actually on the patrol, I guess. They would fight to the death, and if they were defeated you could trust a patrol would be sent after us."

StarClan, please let us pass unharmed, Ravenpaw prayed. He knew StarClan was far away from him, but he hoped even under a strange sky he had kind eyes watching. "It seems like we're going away from it, though, right?"

"We'll see where the trail leads," Rain answered grimly.

Ravenpaw had been hopeful at first, as Acornstar's trail slowly veered away from the Old Thunderpath, but as the shadows over the forest deepened and the sky got darker Frostfall turned back toward the direction of MothClan territory.

Ravenpaw felt his bubbling anxiety twist in his stomach as they traveled closer and closer to the Old Thunderpath. To think MothClan had such a straight shot to his home... Is that how Firebreeze found it? Had he just traveled along the path until he stumbled upon the perfect territory to build a Clan full of killers with hearts blackened, void of love and happiness?

What a horrible life they must live.

Ravenpaw saw the stiffness growing in Rain as they crossed back onto the Old Thunderpath. Frostfall suddenly raised her nose into the air. "I smell water," she meowed.

"Perhaps Acornstar went over to get a drink," Stonecoat meowed.

"She could still be there," Shadefur added.

By the look on Rain's face, she would be in trouble if she was. He opened his mouth to say something, then quickly shut it. He obviously didn't have a way to tell them not to go without giving away the secret.

Ravenpaw knew he had permission to tell the patrol about MothClan, but it would be so hard to explain, and what would Silverstrike do to Rain if he knew the tom once belonged to the strange Clan?

No. He would stay quiet for as long as he could and hope they got by unnoticed. But fear continued to twist and tug at his stomach, and he found himself drifting closer to Rain as they traveled. The tom seemed just as uneasy as Ravenpaw was, and when the river came into view the tom stumbled momentarily. "This is the border to the territory," Rain whispered under his breath, barely loud enough for Ravenpaw to hear.

StarClan protect us, Ravenpaw begged as the patrol stopped by the side of the river. It was frozen over, but a chunk of the ice had been broken to show the water underneath, though a new film had begun to creep over. Silverstrike leaned down to take a few laps, shivering at the touch of the cold water. Then he stepped back to let the rest of the patrol go forward.

But Frostfall was frozen in place, sniffing intently at the chilled breeze. Rain was watching her closely. "It smells likes cats live around here," she meowed after a moment. Rain's claws slid out in anxiety. "I think they've marked the territory."

Bunching her muscles, the white she-cat leaped over the river. Rain opened his jaws to call out a warning, but stopped himself, backing up and looking surprisingly small. His body was tense, like he was ready to run. Ravenpaw couldn't help but copy him, while the rest of the patrol watched Frostfall curiously.

"There's a lot of different smells," Frostfall murmured. "Almost like a border patrol."

"Maybe we should see if they saw Acornstar?" Shadefur suggested.

"No!" Rain gasped before he could stop himself. Everyone looked over.

"What's the matter?" Silverstrike asked. "Don't you want to find Acornstar? These cats could help."

"No, they--" Rain was cut off by Frostfall.

"Quiet!" the she-cat hissed with a flick of her tail, mouth open and nose twitching. "I smell cats coming." She looked deeper into the trees across from the river.

Rain took a step back. "Run," he whispered.

"What?" Silverstrike tilted his head in confusion.

"Run!" Rain hissed, whipping around and racing away as fast as his paws could carry him. With barely any hesitation, Ravenpaw sprang after him. But he didn't hear pawsteps, and he skidded to a stop and looked behind him.

The patrol looked at him in confusion. "Trust Rain!" Ravenpaw cried. "Run!"

Sudden realization rushed to Jaypaw's gaze, and he was racing for his brother. After a brief hesitation, Silverstrike led the three other warriors after them. Ravenpaw ran as fast as he could, following Rain's tracks through the snow. *MothClan's going to follow us,* he thought fearfully. *Rain, I hope you have a plan...*

The tom had paused to wait for them not far up ahead, but started running again the moment they got close. "Follow me!" he growled.

"Rain, slow down! Tell us what's going on!" Silverstrike yowled.

"Keep it down!" the gray tabby hissed.

He led them at a relentless run, and Ravenpaw heard painful intakes of breath from Silverstrike. Ravenpaw knew instinctively his paw wound must've opened wider. But they kept running. They ran and ran until Ravenpaw thought he would drop, then they ran more. Rain never looked back and never slowed down, dodging trees and undergrowth with swift, skillful movements.

Something came into view in front of them--a tall wall of wood, with large, strange objects behind it. Ravenpaw recognized it immediately, from his visits to the past with Echo. "A Twolegplace!" he gasped.

"Don't stop!" Rain growled. "Stay close and follow me no matter what!"

They neared the fence, and without hesitation Rain leaped, dug his claws into the wood, and swarmed over the side. The patrol, even Ravenpaw, skidded to a stop. "Into a Twolegplace?" Silverstrike growled. "No way! We don't know our way around."

"Get over here!" Rain called from the other side. "*Now!*"

"We'll stick to the forest, thanks!" Shadefur called.

"He seems pretty rattled," Frostfall murmured, "are you sure we shouldn't join him?"

"We have to," Ravenpaw told the cats with the most amount of bravery he could summon, but it wasn't much. Fear shivered through his spine at the idea of going into the Twolegplace; something was tugging him back into the protection of the forest, but there was also a strange pull to the Twolegplace in front of him. "I trust Rain, with everything I have." He looked Silverstrike right in the eyes, forcing courage. "We *need* to go."

Silverstrike watched him for a moment, then gave a stiff nod. "Everybody, up and over."

The cats hooked their claws into the wood and climbed. Ravenpaw looked out into the Twolegplace--a large den loomed in front of them, lined up with others as far as he could see.

"Hurry up!" Rain was standing in the snow, looking up at them. "I know this Twolegplace, I can lead us."

"You lived here?" Silverstrike panted as he jumped down, the patrol quietly following him. The ground was cold and the grass felt short and stiff underneath.

"Close by," Rain murmured, with the briefest glance at Ravenpaw. He didn't seem to want to reveal his secret, and Ravenpaw respected that completely.

"Is that why we ran from the rogues?" Silverstrike asked, still

struggling to catch his breath.

Rain nodded. "They're... Merciless. The moment they saw you they would've marked you, and no matter how far you run you wouldn't survive."

Are you marked, Rain? Ravenpaw wondered, his chest heaving and his breath hot. *Do you think MothClan is coming after you?*

"Then shouldn't we keep moving?" Silverstrike asked, checking over his shoulder at the fence as if he imagined the "rogues" appearing then and there.

"Definitely," Rain answered, shaking his coat and trying to steady his breathing. "It's possible Acornstar ended up here, too. Most cats do." He shook his head. "Stay close, and do as I say."

Turning, Rain sniffed the air then hurried along toward the Twoleg den. The patrol kept close to him, keeping to the fence that ran between the den and the one next to it. Rain led them into a small pathway between the fence and den, where tall objects shined silver in the growing moonlight.

Rain flicked his tail to the silver objects, which had multiple odors coming from within it, some harsh and others sour. "That's a trash can. Twolegs throw unfinished food and things in there. Sometimes cats will eat from there if they have to."

Silverstrike curled his muzzle in disgust, while Shadefur murmured to Stonecoat, "dare you to eat from it."

Jaypaw slid to Ravenpaw's side, and the medicine cat apprentice took comfort in the feeling of his brother's thick coat. "It was MothClan, wasn't it?" he breathed in Ravenpaw's ear. The little black tom nodded quietly. Jaypaw responded with a nod, but didn't say anything else.

They followed Rain down the thin pathway and up another fence. On the other side was a brief stretch of snowy grass, then a Thunderpath clean of snow. Even as they watched, a heavy rumbling began to shake the ground and pound in their ears, and a

giant object flashed past, bright yellow eyes sending streaks through the darkening day.

"Is that a monster?" Ravenpaw gasped, shivering in fear. He hadn't seen the monsters that came into EchoClan territory when they found the dead Twoleg, and he was glad he hadn't--the giant creatures looked terrifying!

"Yes, don't worry--they don't leave the Thunderpath," Rain soothed. "And there's not as many during the night." He led them forward to the edge of the path, sniffing the snow. "The path will cover our scent, so we'll have to pass. I know a good place to find mice, it's been there since I was a kit so I doubt it's gone yet."

He looked up and down the path with a quiet intensity.

"When I say go, race across the path and don't stop until you reach the other side. I'll run behind to help anyone who may trip." Rain backed up so the patrol could line up by the side of the black path, and he looked up and down again, ears pricked. It seemed silent, and Rain growled, "now!"

The patrol raced forward. The path was harsh against Ravenpaw's pads, and he couldn't help but worry about Silverstrike. He noticed the tom falling behind, but trusted Rain's orders and kept himself moving until soft snow touched his paws. He slowed to a stop, his muscles sore and burning after so much running through the day. He desperately wanted to rest, but he would follow Rain as far as the tom wanted to go.

Rain slipped to the front again and led them down the edge of the Thunderpath, past multiple Twoleg dens. Many had a yellow glow from within them, while some were dark and quiet. Rain seemed surprisingly brave, but Ravenpaw and his Clanmates bunched together, ears perked to make sure nothing was coming.

Silverstrike was leaving a trail of blood with each step he took, but he kept a brave face and forced himself onward. Ravenpaw hoped he would find some type of herb wherever Rain was taking them.

Eventually, the Thunderpath split off in two directions, one into the

forest and one to more rows of dens, and Rain led them deeper into the Twolegplace, briefly sniffing at one of the trash cans in front of a den. They ended up crossing a few more Thunderpaths, moving deeper into the Twolegplace until the sky was dark and filling with stars. Ravenpaw noticed they looked slightly fainter, harder to see.

"There it is," Rain said suddenly, a small white cloud coming from his jaws. Ravenpaw looked to where Rain was, over a huge area of smooth black rock, almost like a giant Thunderpath, to a grassy area with strange Twoleg objects around, with short oak trees scattered around. "It's called a... park, I believe. Twolegs take their kits here to play. It's empty at night, though, except for other cats."

"And what's with this area in front of us?" Silverstrike limped forward and sniffed at the black ground.

"It's where Twolegs leave their monsters during the day," Rain explained. "There's one over there, though they usually aren't here at night." He nodded his head to the edge of the area, where a dark shape sat in the snow. "Don't worry, it sleeps unless it has a Twoleg in it, and Twolegs are usually in their dens at night."

"Usually?" Shadefur looked over with an ear flicking. "That's comforting."

"Twolegs are scared of the dark," Rain meowed, shrugging. "Come, let's get over to the park--other cats will start to come when it gets late. You can usually find some mice and squirrels roaming around, and Ravenpaw you might find some herbs, but I couldn't say for sure."

"Are these other cats dangerous?" Frostfall asked, with an anxious look at Ravenpaw and Jaypaw. Ravenpaw felt comforted by the she-cat's worry--he had never felt too close to the white she-cat, but yet she was scared for him. She obviously had the makings of a good mother, and he wondered why she hadn't had kits yet.

She will soon, he reminded himself. Frostfall would have kits by the time newleaf came.

"No, most cats are fearful of groups around here." A shiver ran

through his fur, and he started forward across the empty space. The Clan cats followed him, and Silverstrike winched slightly with his steps. It seemed his injury was getting harder to ignore.

"Why are the cats fearful?" Stonecoat asked after a few moments. "Aren't any of them the slightest bit brave?"

"Of course--you have to be in order to be a loner in the Twolegplace," Rain meowed, "but, well, the rogues come here sometimes, usually in newleaf and greenleaf but sometimes in the other two seasons as well."

"Why do they come here?" Shadefur asked in surprise. "Don't they have everything they need in that forest?"

"They do." Rain hesitated, tail flicking. He must be regretting what he said, but knew he couldn't back away. "They... they train their younger cats by attacking the loners here, and take some cats back to their camp to... to, well... The cats that are taken by them never return."

The Clan cats were silent, and Rain let out a soft sigh. They finished crossing the area and stepped into the park. "Let's settle under that tree over there," Silverstrike meowed, leading the cats over to the oak he had chosen and settled onto his stomach.

All the cats lay down to rest their muscles, and though Ravenpaw wished he could join them he instead padded over to Silverstrike with aching bones. "Can I see your paw?" he asked softly.

Silverstrike was busy licking the wound, and after a skeptical look the tom finally displayed his paw, revealing that the cut had indeed opened quite wide, the bright red flesh swollen and irritated.

"Remember to lick it with the tip of your tongue," Ravenpaw advised softly. "Otherwise you'll just tear the flesh."

Silverstrike nodded slowly, and Ravenpaw tried to push away the anxiety in his chest. He hadn't checked close enough if Silverstrike had been doing so before he interrupted him, and now he felt awkward. "I'll go find some goldenrod, though horsetail would

work, too. Marigold would be best, but I doubt I'll find it with no water around... Hopefully leaf-bare hasn't killed everything of use..."

"You sound like Mossrain," Jaypaw joked, approaching his brother and brushing against his side.

"Yeah, but Mossrain's a little louder," Shadefur purred with a spark in his eyes. A brief flame of jealousy glowed in Stonecoat's gaze, then he shook it away.

"I'll start hunting," he suggested.

"Good idea," Rain meowed, getting to his paws. "Shadefur, Frostfall, you in?" He looked to the two cats.

They nodded their agreement, and Silverstrike meowed, "I'll come, too."

"No, stay here," Rain meowed. "You need to rest your paw as much as you can." Silverstrike narrowed his eyes in frustration at the words.

"He's right, Silverstrike," Frostfall murmured, touching the tom's ear with her nose. "We'll be back soon. I'll try to find some cobwebs, too," she added to Ravenpaw.

"Thanks," Ravenpaw murmured, shifting his paws. Frostfall tilted her head in confusion. "Thanks!" he repeated, louder, and she nodded, looking embarrassed, then hurried away.

"Jaypaw, you head with Ravenpaw," Silverstrike grumbled, settling deeper into the snow and continuing to go at his paw.

The apprentices nodded and headed off side by side. Ravenpaw kept his nose in the air, telling his brother, "we're looking for either a tall plant with small fuzzy yellow flowers or a tall plant with bristly stems."

"Sounds good," Jaypaw mewed, brushing against Ravenpaw's side again. "Do you think Eagleclaw let the loner kits into the Clan?"

Ravenpaw was quiet for a moment as he thought about it. Boulderclaw would've definitely made it back to the Clan by now, and he wondered what their reactions were, if any cat didn't want them in. *Grayblaze, no doubt.* "I think she would."

"Do you think Acornstar will let them stay, once she's back?" Jaypaw asked after a moment.

"I... I don't know. It's really hard to predict what she thinks," Ravenpaw muttered, sniffing at a plant he found. He didn't recognize so he moved along, anxiety prickling his step as he traveled further from his Clanmates.

"I hope we find her soon," Jaypaw said quietly, "I really want to get back to the Clan--I miss training...I miss Snowfern," he added.

"I do, too," Ravenpaw answered softly.

Jaypaw let out a small sigh, casting his gaze around the thin sparse of trees. "Is that an herb over there?"

Ravenpaw followed his brother's gaze to a snowy fern bush, where a few stalks of a tall yellow-flowered plant stuck out from the soil. He padded over, sniffing it just to make sure, but it was definitely goldenrod. He nipped them from the stalks, nodded to Jaypaw, and they headed back to Silverstrike.

They could see the tom still laying under the tree, blending in well with the bright area around him, the silver of his fur just a streak over the ground.

Ravenpaw sat next to the tom and began to chew up the herbs, and he instantly seemed to relax as the apprentice rubbed the poultice into the wound. "Keep it off the ground," Ravenpaw told him, spitting out the remains of the goldenrod.

"'Course," Silverstrike meowed. "Thanks, Ravenpaw," he added after a moment.

Embarrassed, Ravenpaw gave a swift nod and headed back to where Jaypaw had settled, pressing against his brother with a grateful groan. His muscles were burning with fatigue, and he was almost

asleep by the time the rest of the cats returned--the only reason he woke was that the wonderful smell of prey made his stomach grumble.

The prey, consisting of mice and squirrels and one thrush, was divided out between the cats, and the moment Ravenpaw finished the squirrel given to him, he felt his mind fuzzing and fading into darkness.

"What's our plan with Acornstar?" Shadefur's voice was faint in Ravenpaw's ears, and the apprentice forced himself up, wanting to hear what was going on. He blinked his eyes harshly to wake himself up more. "We lost her trail when we left the river."

"We could go back," Stonecoat suggested. "Just to track her."

"Too risky," Rain meowed. "They would've scented us, and they'll be patrolling more regularly now, seeing if we'll come back."

"You sure seem to know a lot," Silverstrike commented, a glare of suspicion in his eyes. Anxiety prickled Ravenpaw's spine. Rain didn't seem bothered, though.

"Many cats here have spent their lives learning everything they could about the rogues to protect those they loved," was Rain's quiet response. "Or to keep others from losing the ones they loved.

"And which were you?" Silverstrike asked, eyes hard.

Rain was quiet for a moment, then he answered, "both."

"So how are we finding Acornstar?" Frostfall cut in, obviously wanting to change the subject. Ravenpaw was glad because he didn't know how long he would be awake for.

Rain looked thoughtful. "We could probably find a few cats willing to talk. Those who watch for the rogues might've seen her, or some kittypets who live by the fence."

"We could try asking the cats who come here, right?" Silverstrike asked. "If we're careful not to scare them."

Rain gave a slow nod. "It would be best if only one or two of us went to ask--less likely to scare the cats that way."

"I'll go, then," Silverstrike meowed gruffly.

"Uh, perhaps some cat with more... Tact," Rain suggested. "These cats are scared, alone--they should talk to a cat with a little more empathy."

Silverstrike shrugged as if he knew he couldn't deny the claim. "Who, then? You?"

"I'll go with, but I'm not the best at sympathizing, I don't think. The best cat would be a young, kind one, one others can connect with."

At his words, all the cats looked to Ravenpaw. Even Jaypaw shifted to cast his gaze to his littermate.

"Me?" Ravenpaw mewed, fear rushing over him like a wave. "N-No, I can't--"

"Ravenpaw," Rain soothed with a soft tone. "You're good with talking to cats, you're just not the best at actually getting the words out."

Ravenpaw felt hot with embarrassment, and, not knowing what else to do, gave a stiff nod.

Relief shined in Rain's eyes. "Thank you," he meowed softly. "Rest for a few hours, and I'll wake you when it's time to leave."

Ravenpaw gave another nod, though he was unsure if his anxiety would let him sleep now. He rested his head down, feeling Jaypaw's warmth next to him. Then his brother began to softly lick his neck fur with long, soothing strokes like Snowfern used to it. And despite the bubbling in his stomach and the fear tightening his throat, the world went into a dark peacefulness.

Question #1: How are you enjoying the story? What are your thoughts about the way that it's going?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ravenpaw was awoken by a soft paw in his side when the moon was high in the sky, its light sending silver streaks over the apprentice's black coat. He stood slowly, stretching and shaking himself clear of snow with a large yawn. The rest of the patrol was sleeping with a light sprinkle of snow over their pelts. Rain, though, looked fluffy and awake.

"Did you sleep?" Ravenpaw asked softly, noticing that he had no tell signs of having laid down.

"Some cat had to guard," Rain answered quietly, as to not wake the other cats. Noticing Ravenpaw's worried expression, he added, "I was trained to be able to stay awake for days. I can wait until tomorrow night to rest." He shook his coat and meowed, "follow me and stay quiet. We don't want to scare any cat before we see them."

Ravenpaw followed the tom's orders and walked quietly by his side, looking around the quiet dark area. Soft snowflakes fluttered down and touched his fur, a chilly feeling that did not help his muscles, which were still sore from earlier in the day and tensed from sleep.

Rain's tail softly touched Ravenpaw's shoulder, drawing the apprentice to a stop. The tom nodded his head to a fern bush in front of them, and Ravenpaw noticed a shadow sliding through it, intent on stalking something they couldn't see. Suddenly, it flashed forward, and the sharp aroma of blood touched Ravenpaw's scent glands.

"Go quietly, and speak kindly," Rain whispered in Ravenpaw's ear.

"What should I say?" he murmured back, fear prickling his spine.

"Whatever comes to heart," was Rain's unhelpful reply, and he nudged Ravenpaw forward.

Knowing he had no choice now, the apprentice forced his paws forward one at a time, giving his entire focus on just managing to get them to move. He slowly neared the cat and paused to take a breath. *This is for EchoClan,* he reminded himself. *For Eagleclaw and Mossrain.*

"Excuse me?" he mewed in a light, soft voice, trying to sound as small as he could--it didn't take much.

The cat leaped around, fur bristling and claws sliding out. Ravenpaw was now close enough to make out a pale ginger coat, dusted with snow. "Don't come any closer," the she-cat growled. "Turn around and go away."

"Please, I don't want to fight," he mewled, his fur twitching with fear. "I'm just looking for someone."

"Aren't we all," she taunted, but after a moment her fur lowered slightly, and her claws slid inward. "Who are you?"

"Ravenpaw," he answered, hoping a Clan name wouldn't trigger her.

Her eyes looked downward at his paws. "Strange name--you don't seem to have ravens on your paws."

Ravenpaw opened his jaws to answer, but quickly realized he didn't know what to say, and shut his mouth awkwardly.

The she-cat snorted, flicking her tail. "Who are you looking for?"

"Her name is Acornstar," he answered quickly. "She's a ginger-brown she-cat. She would've arrived in the last few days, probably kept to herself a little."

The she-cat looked thoughtful for a moment, but then she shook her head. "Sorry, kit, haven't seen her." She started to turn away, then added over her shoulder, "good luck. Be safe out there."

"Thanks, you too." He couldn't hide the disappointment in his voice, and headed back to Rain, shaking his head as he got close. The tom, who had settled into the snow to hide, stood up and shook snow from his coat.

"I didn't expect to be so lucky," he meowed. "Let's keep looking."

They got nowhere with three more cats. Two were hostile but were willing enough to answer that they hadn't seen her, while the third fled the moment they had seen Ravenpaw approaching. He wasn't feeling all that hopeful when he approached the fifth cat, an older thick-furred gray tom. But after repeating what he said to all the other cats, the tom tilted his head slightly.

"She look skinny, but muscular from younger seasons?" he asked in a slightly hoarse, elderly voice.

"Yes!" Excitement wriggled under Ravenpaw's fur, chasing away the fatigue that had started to take over once again.

"Well, if so, I saw her by the abandoned Tallwalker den yesterday--I knew she must've been new around here, cats know not to go there anymore after those forest cats raided it a few seasons ago."

"Thank you," Ravenpaw breathed. "Be safe out there."

"You, too, youngster." The tom dipped his head and shambled off. Ravenpaw hoped he would be okay, but trusted than if he had lived this long, he could survive further with no troubles. Rain seemed to know it was good news the moment Ravenpaw started heading back, and he raised his head with interest in his eyes.

"You got something?" he asked hopefully.

Ravenpaw nodded. "He said she was near an abandoned Tallwaker den--that's a Twoleg den, right? Do you know where it is?" Anxiety suddenly rushed over his fur--if Rain didn't know, would they have to ask around again?

Luckily, Rain's eyes shined. "That's close by! Come on, we should leave now. Staying in the park until morning would be a bad idea." He turned and hurried back in the direction of the others, and Ravenpaw kept close to his side.

The patrol was still sleeping at the makeshift camp, curled up to protect themselves from cold. Rain quietly went to Silverstrike, calling his name softly and touching his paw to the senior warrior's

shoulder. Instantly, the silver and white tom flipped onto his back, paws raised with claws out with a warning hiss in his throat. He calmed himself the moment he noticed it was Rain, letting the puffed fur around his neck rest.

The other patrol members awoke from the sound, shaking sleep from their eyes.

"We know where Acornstar is," Rain told the tom. "Or at least, where she was."

Excitement shined in Silverstrike's eyes. "That's enough for me!" he decided, flipping over and getting to his paws. He shook snow from his flattened coat with a soft groan, lifting up his injured paw and giving it a sniff. Ravenpaw approached softly, and the warrior quietly held it out to him.

The snow had kept it clean of infection, and the cold--as well the herbs--had reduced the swelling. "Just be careful where you walk," Ravenpaw decided. He would've liked Silverstrike to rest for a day, but they could do that once they had Acornstar.

"What's going on?" Frostfall murmured, letting out a large yawn.

"Acornstar," Silverstrike replied gruffly, copying her yawn with a flex of his claws.

"Sorry?" Frostfall looked confused, her ears flicking.

With a purr of amusement, Silverstrike clarified with a louder voice, "Acornstar's near."

"Finally!" Shadefur sighed. "I can't wait to get back home."

"Yeah, same," Stonecoat muttered, scratching the snow briefly. Ravenpaw cast a sad glance at his brother--Shadefur and Stonecoat had been closer than ever during the journey, and hearing that they soon would be heading home is probably making him believe Shadefur will leave for Mossrain again.

Can't the three of them just hang out? Ravenpaw wondered.

"We should head immediately, getting there sooner than later would be best. It shouldn't take too long." Rain waited for all the cats to stand and stretch themselves, then he started off at a determined pace. Ravenpaw moved himself closer to Jaypaw, brushing against his brother's cold, wet coat with a shiver.

"I hope we find her and get back," Jaypaw murmured. "I miss home."

"Me, too," Ravenpaw agreed. Then realized, "Oh, I'm going to miss the next Moonstream meeting..." Sadness prickled his fur. StarClan had yet to visit him during his journey, and he didn't like it--he felt very distant from his ancestors. He would be okay going the same length of time without speaking to them in the Clan territories, but the strange stars above him sent an unnerved shiver through his coat.

Jaypaw seemed to sense his sadness and pressed closer as they traveled. "Don't worry, I'm sure they're watching over us. I bet they'll visit you the moment you come back. Maybe they just can't reach you from here," he added.

Ravenpaw gave a slow nod, but anxiety still prickled his fur. It had been a moon since Echo visited him last, and he was almost worried about the she-cat. She was supposed to be showing him the past, but yet she had not visited him in so long--the breaks between the visits had never reached this length.

Maybe she's mad I'm not using my power, Ravenpaw thought. Sometimes, he almost forgot he even had it. Avoiding other cats' noses had become second nature, and his last vision had been quite long ago, over a moon in the past. *Echo must be upset--she convinced me to keep my ability and I haven't even been using it!*

He would find a way to use it, to please Echo. He would just have to wait for the opportunity.

But for now, he focused on finding Acornstar, so he went along with the patrol as they left the park behind and followed Rain along dark, empty Thunderpaths. He kept his nose in the air and his ears perked, and the warriors copied him instinctively, searching for

enemies while staying bunched together.

A monster rolled by on the Thunderpath, moving slow and rumbling loudly. "If that's it stalking, it'd never catch anything!" Shadefur meowed as it rambled past, a Twoleg peering out at them. Ravenpaw felt his spine fur tingling as the creature's pale face stared at him, but then the monster was traveling away, and eventually disappeared around a Twoleg den.

"I've never seen one eat," Rain meowed as they walked. "But I know of a few cats who saw Twolegs feeding them through a hole in their side."

Are those cats MothClan cats you heard the story from? Ravenpaw wondered, peering at the tom.

"Well, that isn't terrifying at all," Stonecoat muttered, shaking his coat. "Any way you can get that image out of my head?"

"I could try," Shadefur answered with a mischievous gleam in his gaze. "It might be a tad painful though." Stonecoat snorted in response, and the patrol seemed to relax a little more as they continued on. Ravenpaw felt warmed by his brothers' amused view on the subject, but he couldn't help but imagine a large hole appearing in the side of a monster and a Twoleg shoving a squealing rabbit inside.

Shaking the image from his head, he walked a little closer to Jaypaw as Rain led them up a fence into a Twoleg "garden", as he called it, the den dark and seemingly empty. Ravenpaw was glad to hurry up the other fence like a squirrel, where he could see a line of dens that went forward for quite a while before taking a sharp turn to the right, where more dens lay once again facing the forest.

"We'll take a shortcut through the forest," Rain meowed. "It'll let us get there a little quicker, and we'll be less likely to run into trouble."

"What about the rogues?" Silverstrike asked, eying the forest with a gleam of anticipation in his eyes. He was anxious to get away from the Twolegplace, even for a few moments, and Ravenpaw couldn't help but agree--he wanted the shelter the forest provided, even if

the branches were bare.

"Their territory doesn't reach this far," Rain explained. "They come here sometimes, but usually only in the warm seasons. They'll be a few loners, but they'll keep distance from a group."

"Like the Twolegplace cats," Silverstike muttered. Then he gave a confirming nod, and Ravenpaw got to leap down from the fence and hurry into the trees. The shadows were cold but a comfort over his pelt, and he noticed the other patrol members relaxing as well. It was unfamiliar territory but at the same time a familiar feeling rushed over them.

Rain led the way through the trees. A few times a loner scent would come to the group, but the cat scent was either dull or fearful and quickly leading off deeper into the forest with frantic pawsteps imprinted into the snow.

They weren't in the forest as long as Ravenpaw would've liked, and soon they climbed back over a fence, Silverstrike wincing and holding his paw slightly off the wood as they reached the top. Rain led them down into a garden, past a den, and back onto the edge of a Thunderpath.

"I thought you said it was close," Silverstrike grumbled as he limped along the edge of the path, leaving red snow after each step of his front right paw.

For an answer, Rain just nodded his head in front of them. On each side of the Thunderpath was a row of Twoleg dens, looking quite older than the ones they had passed before near the park. They looked smaller, darker, and almost as if they were sagging slightly. They obviously needed some Twoleg to come by and help fix them. On the other side of the path, about five dens down was the darkest, smallest den of them all, with rotten wood and long grass that made the snow settle a few mouse lengths above the snow for the other dens.

"Is that it?" Ravenpaw asked, wondering what would never convince Acornstar to travel so far from the Clan territories. Why had she not just traveled for a few dawns, then found a place to

settle?

"Yes," Rain answered. "Come along, and keep quiet. I doubt we want to scare her away." He led the cats across the Thunderpath and up to the den and onto the long grass. The cats sunk deep into the snow, the grass underneath flattening by the weight of their paws. Rain trudged onward, and Ravenpaw and Jaypaw followed his tail to find an easier path. They traveled along the side of the Twoleg den to the garden, the fence looking old and almost swaying in the wind.

The garden was not empty like most others. There was a small, short den at the back near the fence to the forest, with strange sharp-edged brown boulders stacked up the side. And sitting on top of the den, shadowed by the moonlight, was a cat. Ravenpaw knew instinctively that it was Acornstar.

They had found her.

Question #1: What do you think will happen when the cats finally confront Acornstar?

Chapter Twenty-Four

The patrol paused for a moment, almost as if they didn't believe they had finally found the missing leader.

Then Silverstrike gave a small shake of his head and forced himself forward. The rest of the cats followed but kept a few paces back. They reached the bottom of the small den, craning their heads back to get a better view of the cat sitting there, ginger-brown coat darkened by the night.

"Acornstar!" Silverstrike called, his voice cold and harsh in the night air.

The she-cat whipped her head from where she stared at the sky, amber-brown eyes glowing faintly. She stood, prowling to the edge of the small den, and looked down at them. Ravenpaw couldn't read her expression. There was no shock, no anger, no anything. She just looked... tired.

"Why are you here?" she asked darkly, not exactly angry but definately *not* pleased. "Did the distance you had to travel not make you think I might not want to be found?"

"I would've given up a long time ago if I could've," Silverstrike sighed, tail twitching. Then he said, "did you really expect Eagleclaw to just leave you? Take over EchoClan without even *trying* to find you?"

Acornstar's eyes flashed with brief sadness. "She has been leading EchoClan from the shadows for too long. It was time for her to take over, even if StarClan won't let me die." There was a surprising note of bitterness in her voice.

Is that what she really wants? Ravenpaw wondered sadly. Did she just want to die, so she could see Redcloud again? Did she feel as if her nine lives had been a punishment, forcing her to live so many moons without the cat she loved?

"Yeah, well, she won't take over until you're back in EchoClan," Silverstrike growled. "I don't care how long you come back for. You could come just to tell Eagleclaw to stop acting like a kit following their mother then leave for all I care, but you *need to do something*. Take some responsibility, and stop putting it all on your daughter."

Acornstar's eyes flashed with anger and sadness, twisting there like a storm. "I will *never* return to EchoClan!" she vowed darkly. "There is nothing you could ever say to convince me. So leave. Tell Eagleclaw whatever you must to get her to step forward. But I will *not* be there." She whipped around, settling back in the middle of the den's roof. She wrapped her tail around her paws, and returned her gaze to the sky as if the cats weren't there.

Silverstrike lashed his tail, a deep growl in his throat.

"What are we to do?" Shadefur murmured. "We can't exactly drag her back to the territory, can we?"

"No, we can't." Silverstrike hissed, lashing his tail. "Come on, we all need to get some rest. We'll come back tomorrow." He glanced up at Acornstar, raising his voice slightly as he added, "maybe when the sun rises, she'll stop acting like a spoiled kit who didn't get a moss ball to play with."

"And if she doesn't want to come tomorrow either?" Stonecoat asked the tom, but he didn't answer. The warrior sighed and turned to follow Silverstrike, casting a brief glance up at Acornstar. The other cats started to follow, slow and uncertain, but Ravenpaw felt as if his paws were rooted in the snow.

"I know it feels wrong," Jaypaw murmured, running his thick tail along Ravenpaw's side. "We'll come back tomorrow." He started along, but Ravenpaw didn't follow.

Silverstrike looked back, eyes harsh. "Ravenpaw, come *on*!"

Ravenpaw cast a glance back at Acornstar. He couldn't just leave her without saying anything, even just for the night. "Let me talk to her alone," he told the senior warrior, and without waiting for a response he turned and trotted to the den, jumping onto the first of

the smooth, sharp-edged boulders. He realized they were made of wood, smelling rotten and weak under the snow. But he jumped up all of them without incident and landed quietly on the top of the small den. The roof was flat and wooden as well, a thin layer of snow built up on top.

Acornstar didn't look at him as he approached, still gazing quietly at the sky as if she was trying to look through the stars. Silently, Ravenpaw sat next to the she-cat, letting his fur softly brush against her's. This close, he could make out the lines of her body, her face thin and her ribs tight against her coat.

"Why are they silent?" she whispered, still staring at the sparkling warriors in the sky. "They refuse to talk to me... I just want them to talk to me..."

"Perhaps they have already spoken," Ravenpaw murmured, "you just haven't seen it."

"They haven't..." Acornstar whispered with a sad shake of her head. "I would know...I've looked for their signs every moment of every day." Her gaze turned to him. This close to her, the depression in her shattered gaze was heartbreakingly obvious. She was so sad, so broken... "The last time StarClan spoke to me was when I became leader," she said under her breath. "I tried to visit so often, going to the Moonstream almost every night... But they never came..."

She's cut off from StarClan, Ravenpaw realized. For her entire leadership, she had never been able to get guidance from her ancestors... How lonely she must feel...

"I just want to see Redcloud," Acornstar whispered. "But he never came to me..."

"I-if you come back, I can try to talk to StarClan for you, tell them to visit you?" he suggested softly.

She instantly shook her head. "No. No, I can't go back. Not while *she's* there." Fear and anger twisted in the air around her. Ravenpaw realized she was shaking, but it wasn't from the cold.

He almost asked, *who?* but he realized that he *did* know who. Blossompaw. Acornstar had, after all, left after trying to kill her. The leader was *scared* of the young apprentice. "Blossompaw doesn't mean to hurt anyone," Ravenpaw told her softly.

The she-cat let out a soft, sharp breath, almost like the beginning of a laugh. "You don't understand," she growled. Was that the hint of dark amusement in her voice? "That's not Blossompaw anymore. Brookstar has her claws in your sister's mind and she will never let go."

"Brookstar?" Ravenpaw was instantly confused. "B-but Brookstar's dead," he murmured softly. Was Acornstar's mind so messed up that she thought the long-dead traitor was alive in her Clan?

"Dead, but not gone," Acornstar spat, sounding disgusted. "She'll never be gone. Not until she takes over the Clans and destroys them all."

"I..." Ravenpaw's world was spiraling around him. "I don't understand!"

"Brookstar is visiting Blossompaw," Acornstar said simply. "Twisting her mind, trying to make her the best warrior...But Brookstar's version of the best warrior is a murderous traitor, one who won't stop even after they're dead."

"Blossompaw isn't like that!" Ravenpaw told her firmly. "She could never kill! You have no proof that Brookstar is visiting her, so don't say it!" Realizing he had raised his voice, he looked back at the other cats, but they were still settled quite far away, talking amongst themselves. Jaypaw was looking over, but Ravenpaw hoped he hadn't overheard.

"I do have proof," Acornstar whispered. "You saw it, too."

"I don't understan--" Ravenpaw began, but the she-cat cut him off.

"Her injury," she meowed. "Brookstar healed her."

"N-no, St-StarClan healed her," Ravenpaw stuttered, trying to hide the fear in his throat but doing quite a bad job.

"When was the last time you ever heard of StarClan healing an injured cat just because they felt like it?" Acornstar growled.

"They healed you!" Ravenpaw said in desperation, but then her broken, scornful gaze lowered to meet his wide yellow eyes. Fear tingled up his spine. "Didn't... Didn't they?"

Sadness pierced her gaze, and she watched him for one more moment before looking back at the stars with so much intensity it was like she was trying to figure out which star went to which cat watching them from the sky.

"Did... Did *you* train with Brookstar?" Ravenpaw felt terror rising in his heart, and his muscles tensed. He almost wanted to run, to run all the way back to EchoClan territory so he could tuck himself into his mother's side and pretend he never heard any of this.

"I was... lost when I was younger," she murmured, not turning to look at him. "I was desperate. Brookstar told me she could make me the best warrior, make the Clan love me, make my mother notice me... She convinced me everything that was said about her was a lie, that she just wanted to prove to StarClan she was good and pure... But she lied... She made me kill for her--first my best friend, then more. I... I thought I was doing the right thing, that it was StarClan's wish... But then she wanted me to kill Redcloud..."

Finally, she looked at him. Ravenpaw was shivering, and lowered slightly at her miserable gaze.

"I told her that I loved him, but she... she said I couldn't be a great warrior if I was taken by love... I finally realized what she was... but it was too late." She dropped her head to look at her paws, like it was too painful to look anywhere else. "I never told anyone what I did... Only StarClan knew until now... No wonder he won't visit me... He must hate me so much... I killed his littermates because Brookstar ordered it so..." Her body began to slump as if she didn't have the strength to stand tall anymore.

Ravenpaw opened his mouth, but his throat was dry. Acornstar, a leader chosen by StarClan, had *killed*. She had killed her own Clanmates in cold blood because a known killer had asked her to.

He suddenly felt very, very small in a very, *very* big world.

"But even after I left her, Brookstar still had her claws in me," Acornstar whispered. "I didn't want to be leader, but I couldn't say no to Dovestar... Then she died, and she left me... Everyone left me--Brookstar promised to take everyone and she did! Larkpaw was only seven moons old." Her broken gaze returned to Ravenpaw, weak and desperate. "She was innocent! My darling kit was innocent..."

Larkpaw... She must be Eagleclaw's littermate.

"They were all innocent," Acornstar murmured, her eyes once again returning to her paws. "But she took them, she kept taking them and StarClan didn't stop her! She took Redcloud, she took Appleleaf... she took Berrywhisker..."

Berrywhisker? Ravenpaw looked at the leader in shock. He... he hadn't known. He had no idea that Acornstar had been close with the elder. He didn't even remember seeing her the day that Berrywhisker died.

She almost seemed to sense his confusion. "She was my mentor," she explained quietly, softly moving a paw forward and tracing a line in the snow. "She was always there for me, even after I became a warrior. I watched her kits when she wanted to go back to the territory, I taught them games and how to catch tails." A brief heartbroken laugh touched her voice, then it instantly broke. "So... so when Boulderclaw was taken by that eagle I knew I had to try..."

"Brookstar healed you," Ravenpaw realized quietly.

She gave a slow nod. "She was angry, but I promised to do anything to make it up to her... She held it over me for so long, until... well... Redcloud..." She suddenly collapsed onto her stomach, a soft whimper in her throat. "I just want to die," she whispered. "I just want to be with him..."

Ravenpaw didn't know what to say. What *could* he say? Finally, he convinced himself to move his tail, letting it softly settle on the she-cat's back.

"I never wanted to lead," she muttered. "I just wanted Redcloud..."

Eventually, words formed in Ravenpaw's hoarse, quiet mew. "Come back to EchoClan," he whispered. "Go to the Moonstream and get your lives taken away--let Eagleclaw become leader like she was always meant to. You could join the elders, rest until it's your time."

Acornstar was shaking her head before Ravenpaw even finished. "No. Not with Brookstar's claws surrounding us, ready to take any life possible..."

"Blossompaw isn't like that," Ravenpaw promised. "I can talk to her, tell her the truth. You can, too. If we convince her Brookstar is lying, she won't listen to her anymore."

Acornstar looked skeptical, her eyes still uncertain.

"Please, we at least have to try, don't we?" He looked at her with desperate eyes. Finally, the old she-cat gave a quiet nod.

She stood slowly, her legs weak and unsteady. But as she made her way to the edge of the top of the den, she seemed to strengthen. She went slowly down the wooden boulders, Ravenpaw close behind her as she jumped. By the time they touched the ground, the patrol was already coming over, having seen their descent.

"Acornstar has agreed to come back to EchoClan," Ravenpaw told Silverstrike softly. "She is going to visit StarClan to get her lives taken away, then she'll join the elders."

"Can StarClan do that?" Shadefur asked in surprise.

I really, really hope so, he thought, but he didn't want to voice his doubts out loud. "If they can give lives, I think they may be able to take them away, too."

"Let's hope so," Silverstrike growled. "We'll stay here for the night, then leave in the morning."

Ravenpaw flicked his tail in uncertainty. "We should stay a few days," he mewed softly, ears flicking nervously when the large warrior looked down to him. "Acornstar is weak and needs to get up

her strength, and you need to rest your paw. It'll take me a little while to find herbs and cobwebs for it, too. That goldenrod in the park was really lucky..."

Silverstrike snorted, his tongue flicking over his muzzle, then he gave a stiff nod. "Alright, fine. Shadefur, Stonecoat, look around for a place to nest for the night. Frostfall, you head with Jaypaw and Ravenpaw to look for herbs. Rain, keep watch."

But before any cat could move, Frostfall raised her head, whiskers twitching. She opened her jaws, taking in the scents of the air. Silverstrike copied her, and his eyes went wide. "Dogs!" he said.

A growl interrupted any chance to speak. All the cats whipped around to look at the entrance to the garden, where four large animals stood blocking the way. Ravenpaw was washed back to the day Blossompaw had been injured. One dog had been fierce and strong, but now four of the creatures, just as large with gleaming eyes and huge fangs, faced the patrol. Growls rumbled in their powerful throats, but they were still, as if waiting for the cats to make the first move.

"When I say, get to the fence," Silverstrike said under his breath.

"No," Rain argued quietly. "It's too weak, it won't hold us. We'll have to get past them if we want out."

Ravenpaw looked to the small Twoleg den in the garden. If they climbed to the top, they could jump over the fence... For a moment he thought of telling the patrol to go that way, but he knew it was tall enough that it could severely hurt Silverstrike's leg.

The dogs will hurt us more, he thought. But when he tried to open his muzzle, Silverstrike was already talking.

"Frostfall, the moment we open a way, take the apprentices and run. Don't look back," Silverstrike ordered, unsheathing his claws.

"Silver--" Ravenpaw began, but then the tom let out a challenging yowl to the dogs, and, instantly, they charged for the cats.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The paws of the four dogs almost seemed to shake the ground. Instinctively, Jaypaw moved to block Ravenpaw, but Silverstrike was racing to the dogs to distract them, the other warriors following close behind with bristling fur and growls in their throats. In the moment, Silverstrike didn't seem to feel his injury at all.

Silverstrike leaped as he reached the first dog, a large yellow with floppy ears and big, excited yellow eyes. It was slobbering and panting and tried to snap at him, but the tom narrowly avoiding the huge fangs, reaching down to grip the dog's neck with his paws and swinging himself around. The dog began to turn in circles as it tried to get to him, but he crawled up close to its head so it turned wildly, barking and snapping as blood rushed from the wounds Silverstrike was causing.

Stonecoat slashed at a dog with fluffy black and white fur then turned and raced away, leading it deep into the garden with Shadefur on its short tail, taking a running leap onto its back. When it turned to snap at him, he jumped off and raced away, allowing Stonecoat now to take the back and do the same move.

Rain, meanwhile, slashed his claws through the soft flesh of a smaller dog with short gray fur and a wide, short muzzle, then instantly turned and launched onto the back of the fourth dog, a muscular brute with black and brown fur. The gray dog tried to snap at Rain, but he jumped away just as the dog leaped, forcing it to ram into the black and brown. With a growl, the darker dog snapped at the gray, and suddenly, they were fighting *each other*. It looked vicious, with teeth gleaming with spit drooling and eyes flashing with malice.

Genius! Jaypaw was in awe of the tom as he raced away from the two fighting dogs, barking and growling at each other, to help Silverstrike, who was desperately trying to hang on to the yellow dog's head despite its increasingly wild movements.

Suddenly, Jaypaw was shoved away, and he noticed that Frostfall had already started to force Ravenpaw toward the rotten Twoleg fence. "Get out of the way!" she ordered, forcing them onward.

Ravenpaw opened his jaws, letting out a croak as he tried to say something. Jaypaw could see his eyes flashing and new that his brother, like Rain, was smart enough to know another way to fight the dogs other than head on, but in his fear and anxiety he couldn't get the words out.

"Ravenpaw, what are you thinking?" he asked, focusing all his attention on his brother.

His fur bristling, the black apprentice whipped around to look at the small Twoleg den. For a moment, Jaypaw was confused, then he noticed--it was right next to the fence. They could leap to the otherside. It would be a long jump and probably a painful one, but less dangerous.

"Frostfall, we need to climb the den!" He nodded to it, and the white she-cat followed his gaze.

"Go, now!" she ordered, turning to race to the warriors. "Everybody! To the top of the Twoleg den! Follow Jaypaw!"

Terrified of taking the lead but knowing he had to be strong, Jaypaw raced over the grass, looking back to make sure Ravenpaw was following. His brother was right on his paws, eyes wide with fear. They made it to the small den and instantly swarmed up the smooth brown rocks. Jaypaw was surprised to feel it bend slightly, and he realized it, like the den and the fence, was made of rotten wood.

They made it to the top, and Jaypaw was shocked to see that Acornstar was already there, crouched near the edge of the roof with fur bristling. Her eyes were glazed, as if she was stuck in memory. *Coward!* Jaypaw felt a flash of anger--if Ravenpaw hadn't been smart enough to think of the den, the cats could've been seriously injured, while Acornstar hid to protect herself.

But, surprisingly, Ravenpaw hurried over to the she-cat, running his

tail reassuringly along her spine. There was something in his gaze that made Jaypaw think the young black apprentice knew something he didn't.

He knows a lot that I don't, Jaypaw reminded himself, going back to the edge of the den to check on the cats in the clearing. The two dogs were still fighting at the entrance to the garden, while Frostfall had joined Rain and Silverstrike against the yellow dog, attacking it from each side as it snapped. Stonecoat and Shadefur were confusing the white and black, the latter on the dog's back while it chased Stonecoat. But then, without a word to each other, Shadefur jumped away just as Stonecoat skidded to a stop, turned, and launched at the dog's face. It attempted to scramble to a stop, but it was too late--the warrior attached himself to its face and clawed at its eyes with vicious intent.

Shadefur slipped through its front legs, grabbing onto its neck for a moment while Stonecoat jumped off and raced for the den, then his brother was after him while the dog pawed at its face to clear the blood away, whimpering weakly. The gray toms raced up the wooden boulders and stationed themselves on the edge next to Jaypaw, watching anxiously.

"Silverstrike, go! You move slower than us!" Frostfall was yowling, shoving the tom away before quickly turning and slashing at the dog's nose before slipping under its legs.

The tom hesitated for many moments, his tail lashing fearfully. Jaypaw noticed that blood was rushing down his shoulder from a nasty dog bite. Then Rain was next to him, ramming his shoulder into the tom's flank to get him moving. "I'll protect her!" he growled, then turned and went back to the dog.

Silverstrike, finally, turned and began to limp toward the den. Without hesitation, Stonecoat and Shadefur went back down the wooden boulders and hurried to the tom, each pressing against one of his sides to force him on quicker.

The white and black finally looked up, blinking fiercely, and, noticing the three cats, gave an angry bark and raced at them. But they scrambled up the boulders just in time and the dog barked in

frustration. It tried to climb onto the first wood boulder, but it creaked and bent under the dog's weight, and it backed up, growling in frustration. It began circling the den, sniffing fiercely with the fur on its spine bristling.

"Frostfall won't be able to get back up!" Silverstrike cried, standing as close to the edge as he could, leaning over the edge. One of his front paws suddenly slipped, but Shadefur leaped forward, sunk his teeth into the tom's uninjured shoulder, and dragged him back. He collapsed, mewling fearfully. Ravenpaw hurried over, sniffing his wound.

Stonecoat hurried to the far corner, crouching down and leaning over the edge. Shadefur hurried to stand next to him, and braced himself over his brother as the tom leaned down. He let out a low, growling rumble, and the dog hurried over to him, leaping onto the wall in attempt to get to him. It shook the den slightly, but Stonecoat leaned even farther to keep its attention.

Then Rain and Frostfall were racing across the stretch of snowy grass. The yellow dog was following as fast as it could, but the two cats made to the wooden boulders and began their way up. Frostfall was in the lead, but as she reached the top boulder, her paws pressing down on the wood, there was a horrible creaking, a loud crack, and she began to fall.

Her claws flailed as she fell, gripping the wall of the den desperately to slow her decent, and Rain reached out, grabbing her scruff and dragging her to him. She scrambled onto his boulder, fur on end and ears flat. The yellow dog slammed into the lower boulder, and all of them shook violently. The two cats held on the best they could, but slid around with the layer of snow stopping their claws from digging fully in.

Silverstrike reached desperately over the edge, eyes wide with fear. Jaypaw was surprised to see him so passionate about the she-cat--he had always seemed so cold. Frostfall reached up, her paw just barely reaching his. The boulders shook again as the yellow dog tried to climb up and the first box broke under it. The dog wiggled through the broken wood for a moment, shaking itself and growling with anger.

"Climb up, I'll grab you," Silverstrike promised. Shadefur and Stonecoat came back over, and the white and black dog appeared at the front again. The brown and black dog arrived, too, bleeding quite heavily from quite a few wounds. Jaypaw quickly looked over to where they had been fighting and saw a patch of snow drenched in blood, with a trail leading out of the garden. The other dog had retreated.

"Go, I'll make sure you get up," Rain promised. Frostfall hesitated, but when the yellow dog reared up in attempt to reach the cats, she quickly latched onto the wood and started up. It was smooth and her claws slid slightly as the rotten wood curved away from her grip, but after she crawled a small way upward, Silverstrike reached over and grabbed her scruff, dragging her up. Stonecoat reached down and helped him, while Shadefur growled a heavy warning to the black and brown as it reared against the wall, causing it to rock again.

The moment Frostfall crossed the top of the den, Rain dug his claws in and started up himself. He slid down quite a bit with each attempt to get higher, his greater weight making it quite hard. Silverstrike had disappeared to help Frostfall to the center of the den roof, anxiously licking behind her ear to calm her. If Jaypaw hadn't known any better, he would think they were mates. But Silverstrike already had Maskdapple.

Jaypaw focused back on Shadefur and Stonecoat as they hauled Rain over the edge of the den. They collapsed, panting to catch breath. "You're heavy!" Shadefur complained, his tail flicking softly.

"That was brilliant, though, making the dogs fight each other," Stonecoat added. "I would've never thought of that!"

Rain gave a tired nod, leaning down to lick his paw. Jaypaw noticed that one of his claws was broken, and a stream of blood was coming from it. He licked the tip a few times, trying to stop the flow. The whole den shook violently, and Jaypaw heard the dogs' claws scraping against the wood.

"It was good plan to come up here," Silverstrike commented, finally standing up from Frostfall, but keeping close to the she-cat. "But

where are we going now?" He looked at Jaypaw curiously. "It was your idea, right? You thought ahead?"

"No, Ravenpaw thought of it," Jaypaw answered instantly. Ravenpaw, who had moved to Rain and was looking at his broken claw, looked over with anxiety flashing in his eyes. It got stronger as Silverstrike looked at him.

"Where do you expect us to go?" he asked the small apprentice. He truly did seem curious, and not scathing like usual.

Ravenpaw visibly swallowed, and hurried to the edge of the den, nodding to the side. Jaypaw scrambled up, ignoring the strain of his muscles, and looked to where his brother was. The fence was far, but a manageable jump. "It would be hard and it will hurt, but we'll be safe from the dogs when on the other side, as long as we leave quickly."

Rain approached with a small limp. "He's right. The fence will give if they jump against it too much, but if we leave right away we could get across the Thunderpath and back into the forest before they reach us--they'll have a few fences to go through that are more solid." His claws dug into the wood as it rocked from the dogs' weight.

"Will Silverstrike make it, though?" Frostfall asked worriedly. Ravenpaw sent an obviously scared glance at the silver and white tom. His shoulder was still bleeding, and he held his injured paw off the ground. Jaypaw could see the open wound, bleeding and swollen from being walked on so much.

"I can do it," Silverstrike growled, his eyes hardening. The den shuddered again as the dogs threw themselves against it. They were barking, growling deep in their huge chests as they attempted to get at their prey. Shadefur walked over, and the den shivered under him. His eyes went wide with fear, and he seemed to brace himself.

"We need to hurry," Ravenpaw said anxiously, his ears flat and his pupils wide in fear. "The den is going to collapse soon." As he spoke, there was another shake, more violent than all the rest.

"Jaypaw, Ravenpaw, you two first," Silverstrike ordered instantly. "Frostfall, you after, then Stonecoat and Shadefur. Rain, you after Acornstar."

"You need to get over, too, Silverstrike, more than us," Frostfall reminded him firmly, pressing against his side.

"I won't leave until you all are safe," he growled, with no question in his eyes. "That's my job as the leader of this patrol. Go, now," he added as there was another tremble under them.

Jaypaw pressed against Ravenpaw. "Jump as far as you can," he reminded his brother. The other cats backed up to give them room. Ravenpaw nodded, too distracted to say anything, and took a few steps back. He let out a slow breath, his body quaking, then he raced forward. As his small black paws reached the edge of the wood, he bunched his muscles and leaped. He soared through the air for a moment, narrowly missing the fence, and landed heavily in the snow on the other side, his legs crumpling as he collapsed onto his side.

Jaypaw leaned over the edge anxiously, watching his brother. "Are you okay?" he called.

After a moment, Ravenpaw forced himself up, turning to look at his brother with a nod. Jaypaw instantly understood his silence--they needed the dogs to believe they were still up here for as long as they could. Silverstrike saw it, too, and told the cats, "after you jump over, don't talk. Keep quiet so the dogs don't realize we've left."

The cats nodded quiet agreement as Jaypaw backed up. He made sure he knew the amount of paces he needed to take, and, not giving himself enough time to second think himself, he ran forward. His paws thrummed over the wood, shaking the den as he went. His pads curled against the edge of the wood, and he pushed off with all the strength he could manage.

Then he was over the grass, barely clearing the fence, and suddenly thudded into the grass. The pressure on his front paws was too much to bear and he collapsed just like Ravenpaw had. He held in

his gasp of pain, and felt Ravenpaw's cold wet nose anxiously nosing his neck. He forced himself to his paws, softly touching his brother's cheek to remind him he was safe.

He looked anxiously back at the den. If it rattled so much when Ravenpaw and Jaypaw went over it, what would happen when full-grown warriors raced along? He could see it shaking from the dogs, hear them snarling and growling. Frostfall flashed across the roof and flew through the air. Her landing was smoother, but she stumbled and gasped and had to trot a few paces to slow herself. Ravenpaw hurried to check on her.

Next came Shadefur and right after him Stonecoat, both managing their leaps but instantly deciding they'd rather fall down and roll onto their backs to rest themselves for a moment. Shadefur battered at Stonecoat's nose for a moment. Jaypaw instantly recognized the playful bats as a way to hide his fear of how close he had been to losing his brother.

Acornstar landed with shocking grace, her pawsteps light but her eyes dull. She staggered away blindly, and Ravenpaw rushed over to speak softly in her ear. Her tail flicked, and she sat quietly. Ravenpaw brushed his tail soothingly over her spine, and she seemed to relax. Jaypaw suddenly felt very grateful for the calm sincerity his brother had mastered--he didn't think any cat could treat such a strange, messed up cat with such kindness, not to mention how he could ever convince her to return to EchoClan after she vowed not too.

It was a few moments later when Rain landed, landing with barely a grunt on heavy paws, but yet he didn't even stumble, straightening up in the exact place his paws had first touched down. Jaypaw looked back to see Silverstrike hesitating on the edge of the den roof. It was shaking quite violently now, the dog barking louder, harsher.

Silverstrike began to back up, swaying from the shuddering of the den. He started forward, but his movements were slow and shambling from his injured shoulder. Right at the edge, he stopped, worry finally spiking in his gaze. He couldn't pick up speed. He tried again, a little faster this time, but once again it wasn't fast

enough, and he barely managed to stop at the edge, almost toppling over the side.

Unable to stop herself, Frostfall gave a fearful mew, and the barking paused. Ravenpaw saw the fence shake slightly, a loud sniffing come at the bottom, then it moved again. A soft growl echoed. Silverstrike let out a yowl from the top of the den, and the fence fell still as a huge shudder shook the small den.

"Run!" Frostfall cried, unable to stop herself. Silverstrike waited for a moment for the den to stop moving, then he raced forward. He reached the edge and leaped. But as his front paws left the den, a horrible shudder went through it as the dogs slammed against the wood once again, and his jump faltered.

His stomach slammed into the top of the fence, and he yowled in pain. He desperately scrambled against it. With a terrified cry, Frostfall raced for him, the three warriors on her paws, while Jaypaw hurried to press against Ravenpaw because his brother was trembling as fiercely as the den had been.

The fence shook violently once again, and Silverstrike let out a loud screech. The scent of blood that had softly touched the air suddenly became much sharper, and the fence leaned back as Silverstrike was pulled backward. Frostfall reared up onto the fence, but he was much too high. She tried to climb it, but it wobbled and shook at her weight. Rain grabbed her shoulder and dragged her back.

The silver tom continued to disappear, dragged by the dogs. He was caught on the fence for a moment from under his front legs, his paws flailing uselessly through the air. Frostfall shook Rain off and reached up again, her eyes desperate. "No, no, no! Silverstrike, please!" She scratched uselessly at the wood.

Silverstrike locked eyes with her for just a moment, then the tom disappeared over the edge of the fence. There was a horrible screeching of a cat in agonizing pain, then it cut off with the sharp bark of a dog and the sound of ripping fur.

Well, I'm sure most of you already figured that this outcome would happen, but I bet you all still hate me for doing it.

Today is 12/4/20 as I finish this, the same day I posted the last Chapter. I had restarted this one to write it better and wrote this in about two hours. What a fun time I had…

Chapter Twenty-Six

Willowpaw padded quietly through the snowy forest, letting her pelt softly brush against a fern bush, enjoying the brief chill of snow as it landed on her pelt. In front of her, she could see Rock's fluffy gray tabby tail disappearing into some undergrowth as he searched for prey. He appeared a moment later, coated in white with his mismatched eyes wide and searching. Snowfern padded past him as she led the patrol, her tail briefly brushing over his pelt.

A small flame of jealousy appeared in Willowpaw's stomach as she saw the glow of love in her mother's eyes for the young tom, but she pushed it away and continued forward. She could hear Boulderclaw a little away, his smooth voice soft as he spoke to Lark about their common hunting in trees.

"I don't see why we need the trees when we have the ground," Pine's voice piped in softly, her thick brown tabby coat standing out against the whiteness of the forest.

"It's good hunting, and it keeps us strong," Boulderclaw answered.

Willowpaw didn't listen to hear what the she-cat would say next, and instead slipped farther away to head toward the river nearby. The water was frozen over, and she pressed experimentally against the ice, trying to break it. It sent icy veins up into her pad and up her leg, and she retreated.

Soft paws came beside her, and she looked over to see Snowfern padding up. The warrior sniffed at the ice briefly, then looked around the pale forest. "They're fine cats, aren't they?" Snowfern asked softly, her eyes on Rock farther down the river's edge, sniffing at a small hole in the earth.

Willowpaw softly flicked her tail, unwilling to admit that her mother was right. Rock and his sisters had proven to be quite good

hunters and were quick to take to everything they were taught--Snowfern and Boulderclaw were in charge of their training until Acornstar could return and give them real mentors and Clan names.

Snowfern pressed both her front paws against the ice, but it held steady. "Is it solid?" Willowpaw wondered.

Snowfern peered closely at the ice, then shook her head. "No, I see water underneath. Too thick to break, though. Come on, let's see if we can find a vole or two."

She followed her mother along the side of the water, keeping her mouth open. Her throat quickly became cold and dry, her breath a heavy white cloud each time it came out. She heard a brief squeal touch the air, and a moment later Lark appeared from the undergrowth with a shrew in her jaws.

"Good job!" Snowfern praised, her tail flicking calmly. Trying to ignore the small resentment in her heart, Willowpaw left the cats and crossed the river, going deeper into the trees. The air began to get sweeter, and she knew she was approaching the SageClan border, along with the BatClan one. Eventually, the faint scent of thrush touched her nose.

She crouched instantly, carefully drawing her tail to her side. She moved forward on soft paws as to not break the snow. She moved closer to where she scented the prey, eventually seeing it's brown and white feathers next to the roots of an oak tree, its beak in the snow as it searched for food. It was surprisingly plump for leaf-bare, and completely distracted.

She was close enough that she could get a perfect leap, and she knew, instinctively, that there was no possibility that she would miss or that it would flee. She was going to prove she was just as good as the loner kits. She let her body loosen as she drew her tail against her side, shifting her shoulders to make sure they were ready to leap. She bunched her muscles as she gathered herself.

Then she thought of Rowanpaw. His Clan, his brother, was suffering. They were starving and desperate for every bit of food. The Old Thunderpath was just a few trees away, she could even see

the change of thick oak to thin pine. Without a second thought, Willowpaw let her body fly through the air. The fat thrush didn't even notice she was there until she was on it. She shoved its head into the ground to keep it quiet, casting her glance around the forest as she held it still.

All was quiet, no cat could see her.

She leaned down and gave a sharp bite to one of its wings. Its body trembled and wiggled as it tried to escape. Knowing it was now lame, she stepped back. With a cry, the bird fled on small legs, injured wing trailing behind it, as it hurried straight from her in the direction of the BatClan border.

She kept with it, making sure it didn't stray from its path, but it kept straight as it made it through the trees and went, squawking, over the snowy Thunderpath. It disappeared into the BatClan forest, and Willowpaw had the feeling that the starving cats would find it.

Willowpaw stood there for a moment, feeling a twinge of guilt. *What if some cat goes hungry now?* she wondered, trying to fight away her worry. Their forest still had a good supply of prey this leaf-bare, as though it was cold, the weather was quite mild. *BatClan needs it more. We have enough prey to last us.* Knowing she couldn't change what she had done, she turned and headed away, making sure to lick the blood away from her paws and muzzle.

Willowpaw brushed past some undergrowth next to the river to see her mother settling down next to Boulderclaw, pressing into his side. They were facing away from her, and had not noticed her approach. "You look like the water just swallowed your fresh-kill," the white and black warrior said softly, wrapping her tail around the warrior's muscular frame. "Do you want to talk?"

Willowpaw pressed herself to the snow. She didn't like eavesdropping, but she was dreadfully curious about what Boulderclaw would say, and she also didn't want to interrupt.

The gray and white tom was silent for a few moments, still staring into the river. Then, finally, he meowed softly, "I'm so worried. Something feels... wrong. I woke up this morning feeling sick to my

stomach."

"You should check with Mossrain when we get back," Snowfern meowed softly, nudging his cheek with her nose. "Or do you think something happened?"

Boulderclaw gave a quiet sigh. "It's the same feeling I always get," he murmured. "Whenever, you know..."

Snowfern gave a soft nod, pressing even closer to him, and she gave him a soft lick behind his ear. "I'm sure the patrol is fine," she meowed softly. "Silverstrike will keep everyone safe, I know it. He won't let anything happen to Jaypaw or Ravenpaw, and I know Shadefur and Stonecoat can take care of themselves."

"I know," Boulderclaw murmured. "But... I... I just..." His head dropped slightly. "There's this twisting in my stomach that's telling me something's wrong."

"Just breath, Boulderclaw," Snowfern whispered in his ear, pressing her cheek against his. Willowpaw noticed her mother's spine fur lifting slightly. For all her calming words, she was obviously worried herself, but she was doing everything to hide it from her mate. "They'll be okay. They'll be back soon, I know it, and they'll all be safe."

Willowpaw almost opened her mouth to vocally agree with her mother. She felt more confident than Snowfern seemed. She was worried about all four of her brothers, but she would know if something was wrong, she knew that much. She would know if something was wrong with her littermates--she would feel it. But as far as she knew, they were fine. She had a feeling they would be okay.

By the time they returned back to camp, Lark had a squirrel in her jaws and Snowfern a sparrow. Willowpaw watched them deposit their prey on the fresh-kill pile, adding to the pieces already there. It seemed like there would be enough for every cat to eat tonight. Willowpaw settled in front of the apprentices' den and began to clean her fur, casting her gaze around to see if she spotted Blossompaw. Neither her nor Oakcloud were in the clearing. She

hoped they were training.

Snowfern settled near the medicine cat's den with a large vole. Spotting Willowpaw alone, she flicked her tail for her daughter to join her. The apprentice stood and shook her fur, then padded over. She settled against her mother's warm side, enjoying her soft, sweet scent that somehow still had a slight sappy tang.

Snowfern took a bite of the vole and nudged it to Willowpaw. The meat was warm and juicy, filling her cold body with comfort. She felt herself relaxing slightly, leaning even closer to her mother. Snowfern swallowed her morsel, and meowed, "I love you, Willowpaw."

Willowpaw was confused and slightly worried by her mother's sudden words, but instantly responded, "I love you, too."

Snowfern continued with a soft voice, briefly looking at the clearing. "I will always support you, and love you no matter what, but you should watch your priorities."

Willowpaw flattened her ears, feeling her heart clench.

Snowfern's eyes were soft as she gazed at the young cat. "I saw you, with the thrush," she meowed.

Willowpaw swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. "I..."

Snowfern's tail softly ran along her daughter's spine. "I used to do it, too," she admitted, no shame in her ice blue gaze. "I would send prey over the border as often as I could, while still contributing to EchoClan. I knew I was breaking the warrior code, but I was desperate to help my old Clanmates, my old friends. Eventually, I realized that I was still as loyal to BatClan as I was to EchoClan, and it was hurting me. A lot. I was torn between them and for a time, I couldn't chose. I finally decided on EchoClan, fully and completely. It still hurts to know BatClan is suffering, but they aren't my Clan anymore. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Willowpaw looked down. "I..." She fell silent, not knowing what to say.

"I know it's hard, but it's life. Do you want to talk about why you did it? Was it because of what Dawnstar said?" Snowfern's voice was warm and soothing.

"No!" Willowpaw said quickly, anxiety making her heart race. What would her mother say? Her mother was disappointed in her just for sharing a single piece of prey, if she knew Willowpaw had been visiting Rowanpaw... She knew she couldn't say anything--Pebblepeak would get in trouble, too. "I just... I just thought one bird wouldn't matter."

Snowfern didn't look convinced, and she was quiet for a few moments. Then she nodded. "Okay, just... Be careful, Willowpaw." Her tail flicked.

Boulderclaw padded up a few moments later, a mouse in his jaws. He settled down on Snowfern's other side, while the she-cat took another bite of her own prey. When the three finished, Snowfern leaned over and began to clean behind the tom's ears. His eyes closed slightly as he relaxed.

Willowpaw was happy to have the conversation over, despite the pang of fear in her stomach, and she rested against her mother's side. Her mind wandered as she lay there. Tomorrow she would get to speak to Rowanpaw again. The last time she was there it had been slightly brief, where they had spoken about Violet and Rain and she had cleaned his fur. Tomorrow would be the first time Pebblepeak would come with to wait in the Gathering Hollow.

She was excited to speak more to Rowanpaw, to help him come out from his shell more. She had realized a few dawns later, after their meeting, that she hadn't told Rowanpaw about the death of Bloomcloud, the she-cat who had raised him. She was worried about telling him of something sad, but maybe it could, in some way, help. It could connect him with BatClan again.

Willowpaw raised her head as Maskdapple approached. The she-cat looked tired and slightly unsteady, but other than that, she was plump and healthy, and there was a soft glow in her eyes. Her fur was smooth and shiny, and she looked relatively happy. "Boulderclaw," she greeted, "I was wondering, do you have any idea

where the patrol might be?" Worry spiked her gaze. "Do you think they might be headed home?"

Willowpaw wondered if her father would mention his bad feeling from earlier, but his eyes were kind when he meowed, "I'm sorry, I truly don't know. It's impossible to say what is happening with them right now. But I'm... I'm sure Silverstrike is okay, if that's what you're worried about."

Sudden realization shined in Snowfern's eyes. "Maskdapple, are you expecting kits again?"

Embarrassment shined in the old warrior's gaze, and she looked briefly at her paws. "Is it that obvious?"

Snowfern let out a soft purr. "I should've realized earlier! I'm so happy for you--it'll be a great surprise for Silverstrike when he returns. How far along are you?"

Maskdapple purred with her. "Almost a moon," she said proudly. "I hope he'll be home before they come--I'm sure he'll be quite shocked. Oh, excuse me, I promised to talk to Petaldust about kit names. I swear, he's almost more excited than I am!" She hurried off to the young warrior, who had just emerged from the warriors' den. When he saw his mother, his eyes lit up and he hurried to meet her.

Willowpaw watched them settle together near the nursery. "Isn't it a little soon to have another litter?" Willowpaw wondered aloud to her parents. Shadefur and Stonecoat were quite a few seasons older than her and her littermates, but Petaldust and Brightflower were barely warriors.

"Well, Maskdapple was quite old for her first litter," Snowfern said softly, "but she always wanted kits. Whether she planned it or not, this new litter will be her last, and I'm sure she's grateful to have them."

Willowpaw nodded silently. She hoped she was in camp when Silverstrike returned, so he could learn he would have more kits. She didn't know how good of a father Silverstrike was--from what she had seen he obviously loved his kits, but was still a little harsh.

She wondered what he would be like with little kits tumbling around his paws.

"Snowfern," she began curiously, "do you plan on having another litter?" Would she feel betrayed? She didn't like the attention her mother gave Roinstrike's loner kits, but she knew her mother still loved her completely--after all, it was her laying next to Snowfern's side, not Rock or Lark or Pine. And wouldn't it be cute to have more kin, to give badger rides, not to another cat's kits, but to her own sisters or brothers?

Boulderclaw cast an amused glance at his mate, but there was also a curious undertone. Snowfern let out a soft purr, looking at both of them. "I don't know yet," she finally answered. "I want to watch you four grow up before I ever think about more kits. I can still remember seeing you all for the first time." A strong glow of love touched Snowfern's gaze, and she licked Willowpaw behind the ear.

The apprentice leaned closer to her mother. She felt calm and happy as she considered her future. She would have her parents, her littermates, her friends. But then a new thought slipped quietly into her mind--would she have Rowanpaw?

I planned to post this early, but I'm having some troubles with the next Chapter and getting it to sound good. I'm still at the beginnings of it, but I refuse to update late. I hope the next one will be on time, maybe even early if I can tough it out. I hope you enjoyed!

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The silence in the air was as cold as the snow under paw as the patrol made its way through the chilly forest. The bare branches clattered in the early morning air, the only sound other than crunching snow. Ravenpaw had never felt so small and unprotected. No cat had spoken since they left the Twolegplace behind--Rain had led the cats along the Thunderpath in the opposite way they had come, crossing over before monsters started to rush down the path and leading them into the forest away from MothClan territory.

The river that acted as their border flowed underneath the Thunderpath and continued onto this side of the land, the growing sunlight reflecting off the ice, and for a moment Ravenpaw thought he caught the shadow of a fish swimming under the protective sheen.

A small whimper behind him made his ears flick to attention. He looked back, seeing how far Frostfall had fallen behind. Shadefur was pressed against the she-cat, quietly murmuring into her ear to keep her going. His words were lost in the air to Ravenpaw, but he assumed it was something kind and possibly hopeful--after all, he had kept Frostfall going despite her dragging paws and dull eyes.

A pang of sadness rushed through him, wishing he could comfort the she-cat, but what could he say? He could still hear Silverstrike's cry in his ears, as if it had gotten stuck there. That horrible sound, the terror that had twisted in the air as he opened his jaws. Then that horrible ripping of fur... Silverstrike hadn't deserved to die that way.

StarClan, Ravenpaw prayed, not for the first time, *please,* please*, find Silverstrike and take him home. Let him rest...* He knew he could never speak about the fear in his heart. They were so far from the Clans... He had worried about StarClan watching over them, and what if they weren't? Chiveclaw had come to fetch Berrywhisker when she had died, he remembered from his vision, so what if no cat came for Silverstrike? Would he be forced to wander alone for

the end of time, begging for help when no cat could hear him?

Ravenpaw shivered, and he had a feeling it wasn't from the cold.

Rain slowed to a stop, holding out his tail to tell Ravenpaw to do the same. Jaypaw pressed close to Ravenpaw as he came to a pause next to him, his thick fur a sudden comfort the medicine cat apprentice hadn't felt yet that day. Rain nodded to a nearby oak tree, larger than the others around it with a small entrance to a hidden den under the roots.

Rain signaled for the patrol to stay and headed forward slowly, his claws sliding out as he scented the air. Ravenpaw raised his nose and sniffed, but he couldn't catch a scent over the overpowering snow snuffing out everything that wasn't scentless cold or sappy wood. Stonecoat, after a brief hesitation, headed after the tom on slow paws. He had previously been walking next to Acornstar, though Ravenpaw had noticed he looked more like a guard than a friend or helper.

Rain looked back at the younger tom's pawsteps, and he gave a sniff nod before continuing forward. Ravenpaw started to feel uneasy as they approached the small hole. Rain sniffed around the entrance, then his bristling fur relaxed. "It's safe," he called back, his voice crackling like thunder in the silence despite the fact he had spoken softly.

The patrol headed over on quiet paws, Frostfall still slow and stumbling. Ravenpaw leaned close to the den, spying into the darkness. The den was flat but large, bits of light shining in from many openings that had opened around the roots. It wouldn't keep out all the wind, but it would be much warmer than nothing.

"We'll need bedding," Ravenpaw said softly, knowing that, more than ever, Frostfall would need a soft nest.

Rain gave a small nod. "I'll search for moss and ferns. Prey, too. A warm belly will dull the grief." A brief flash passed over his eyes, and Ravenpaw wondered if he was thinking of Violetfrost. Grief was a wound only healed by time, but Ravenpaw was curious if Rain's internal injury of losing his mate had healed at all during their

journey. He suspected being so close to MothClan might've made the pain worse.

Shadefur led Frostfall up the den, murmuring to her and nosing her inside. When she finally slipped in and collapsed down, the gray tom flicked his tail to tell the cats to come away from the den. They all followed except for Acornstar, who instead just sat in the snow and looked up at the sky.

Ravenpaw was worried for the she-cat. She hadn't said anything since they had talked privately on the roof of the small Twoleg den. Her eyes were glazed, as if she was lost in a memory. He hoped she would be okay for the journey back.

Once Shadefur had brought them a good distance from the den--though still in their sights--he stopped and meowed in a soft voice, "we might have to stay here for a while, until Frostfall... feels better."

Both Shadefur and Stonecoat were watching Rain with expectant eyes. It seemed the young toms were ready to let Rain take the lead, despite him only being in the Clan for such short of a time. The gray tabby was quiet for a moment, then nodded. "That's probably for the best. We can gather strength, then get moving quicker. I bet we'll be back before the full moon."

Shadefur and Stonecoat nodded in agreement. Then a strange, worried look briefly passed over Shadefur's face. He opened his mouth, then quickly closed it again, hesitating for a moment. Finally, he meowed, "I'm going back."

Stonecoat tilted his head in confusion, while a similar look crossed Rain's features. "Back? Back where?"

"To the Twoleg den," the young gray tom said instantly. "Silverstrike deserves to be buried, not left to rot. He was a warrior, and deserves a vigil."

The cats were quiet for a few moments. "I don't understand Clan customs as well as I would like," Rain began, "but I understand wanting to bury someone you care about. It would be cruel to his

memory to leave him to the crows."

"But what if the dogs are still there?" Jaypaw asked quickly, tail flicking in fear.

"We'll have to hope they aren't," Rain answered. "If we have to... we'll lead them away. Leaving him there... it's not an option." He shook his coat, taking a deep breath as he raised himself up. Ravenpaw felt extremely small in front of him--even Shadefur and Stonecoat looked shadowed by his size. "We'll hunt, rest a little, then the three of us will head over. Jaypaw, Ravenpaw, you'll stay back with Frostfall and Acornstar."

Ravenpaw imagined watching the patrol move off to get Silverstrike's body, and hated the thought of letting them into the Twolegplace alone. He had a strong, unfightable urge to say something, so, despite his fear, he did-- "I want to come with," he said, with surprising strength. "In case you need me."

Rain was quiet for a moment, looking him over, then he gave a nod. "Okay. But you'll stay away from any fight and listen to what I say."

Ravenpaw nodded instantly. "Of course."

Jaypaw's eyes flashed with unease, but he gave a small shake of his coat and let his gaze calm. "I'll make sure Frostfall and Acornstar stay at the den," Jaypaw said softly.

Rain's eyes turned to him, glowing with kindness. "I trust that you'll do well. While we're hunting we'll mark the territory around here, to ward off others. I'm sure you'll be safe while we're gone."

Ravenpaw forced himself to believe that everything would be alright, but he had a strange churning in his stomach that told him something was wrong. He tried to tell himself that he would be able to help the patrol if they got injured--after all, that's why he was going back with them--but his stomach just seemed to curl in on itself until he thought he might vomit.

Something just felt... wrong.

Shadefur, Stonecoat, and Rain brought back plenty of prey for them to share, but both Frostfall and Acornstar refused to eat; Frostfall stared mindlessly at her paws, eyes wide and empty, while Acornstar hadn't even come into the den, sitting out into the snow and staring at the sky, which was slowly turning from orange to a pale blue.

As the cats emerged back into the sunlight--Jaypaw laying beside Frostfall in the den and pushing prey under her nose--Acornstar turned to look at them. "You're fools for going back there," she said softly.

Ravenpaw didn't know how she knew, as they hadn't mentioned it to either Acornstar or Frostfall, but he dismissed the thought and decided she had overheard. She still had a distant look in her eyes, twisting with painful memories. Rain ignored the she-cat and led Shadefur and Stonecoat off.

Ravenpaw paused next to Acornstar, looking at her with sympathy. He didn't know if his Clanmates understood what Acornstar was going through--part of him wondered if *he* even fully knew. "We'll return to EchoClan soon," he promised softly, speaking almost under his breath.

Her eyes were still emotionless. It almost looked as if she was looking through him. "Your faith is either admirable or foolish," was all she said before turning her eyes back to the sky.

Ravenpaw felt a pang of sadness. She seemed even worse than when they had first found her. Perhaps she had forgotten what it was like to be with other cats again, after forcing herself into isolation for so long.

Flicking his ear, Ravenpaw turned and raced after Rain. He met with the gray tabby quite quickly, as he had been kind enough to walk slowly to wait for him to catch up. They walked through the forest in silence, listening as the birds began to sing in the trees, twittering sounds that fluttered through the wind.

It didn't take too long to hear loud rumbling in the distance and a shorter time to see the flashing shapes rushing along the

Thunderpath. They moved with speed and precision, an endless wave of monster after monster.

"How do you expect us to cross that?" Shadefur called as they reached the edge of the trees where the Thunderpath cut through the forest. Dirtied snow had piled up on each side of the path, the slush cleared away in the line of where the monster's paws ran along the ground.

"The monsters move slower inside the Twolegplace--we'll just have to cross further up," Rain called back, his voice rising to cut out the growling of the monsters.

So they traveled along the edge of the path, their fur ruffled as the monsters rushed past, bring blasts of air that thudded in their ears. "Is this the same path as the one that goes through our territories?" Shadefur called above the wind, ears flattened so they didn't swing wildly about.

"No," Rain replied over the air, to Ravenpaw's relief, "that Thunderpath runs through the open territory between the Twolegplace and the rogues' border. It turns into the Twolegplace, not far from where we had left it the other day. This Thunderpath curves away from the rogues' home and deeper into the forest. I don't know where it goes."

Ravenpaw was grateful for this description. Knowing that the Thunderpath next to his territory wasn't directly connected to MothClan's home calmed him. He noticed that both his older brothers looked relieved, too.

As they neared the Twolegplace fence, Ravenpaw noticed that the monsters, as Rain had said, moved a little slower, though they still flashed by with terrifying speed. They passed through the space between the fence and the path without any trouble, but they slowed as they entered the Twolegplace.

With new morning sunlight brightening the air, Ravenpaw spotted many Twolegs in their gardens, doing strange things he didn't understand. Some Twolegs had strange objects like long, thin branches with a flat part at the end which they used to move the

snow from around the monsters parked in front of the dens, while others stood and seemed to be talking to each other.

Rain stopped them before they went too far into the Twolegplace. The Thunderpath they had been following split off down between more Twoleg dens on the opposite side than they were on, the same path that the abandoned Twoleg den lay next to.

"When I say run, go as fast as you can and don't stop no matter what. I'll run behind you and make sure every cat gets across. Trust me, stopping to worry will just get you killed. Move fast and it'll be over in a heartbeat."

Ravenpaw tried to swallow the fear rising in his chest, but it seemed to choke him. Shadefur seemed to notice his anxiety, and brushed reassuringly against his side. "Just breath," his brother said softly, tail flicking over his spine.

They lined up along the side of the path, a few mouse lengths from the edge to keep themselves safe. Monsters rushed past, almost like a never-ending stream, but looking up and down the path, Ravenpaw spotted a break in the line of beasts. "Ready yourselves!" Rain called. Ravenpaw forced himself to brace his muscles, crouching down in readiness to leap across the path. A monster rushed past, then the air settled. "Now! Go!"

Without hesitation, Ravenpaw flung himself onto the hard ground. The earth rumbled under his paws, threatening the approach of another monster, but then his paws hit snow again and he left the heavy growls behind him. He heard his brothers next to him, their breathing harsh in their rush, but together the three of them slowed. Ravenpaw struggled to control his fear as he let his paws falter and pause in the snow.

Rain fell to a stop next to them, his breathing surprisingly calm. "We'll head up slow. Ravenpaw, if we spot the dogs, turn and run and hide."

The apprentice, his heart stuck in his throat, barely managed a nod. There was a silence on this Thunderpath that he didn't like. He could see Twolegs moving inside their dens from the clear openings

in the walls, but they didn't come outside. Rain led them slowly toward the abandoned Twoleg den, getting closer with each den that they passed. It looked even worse in the sunlight, every bit of the wood dark with rot. Ravenpaw didn't know how it was still standing.

There was no noise as they approached the den, the grass long enough that the snow on top brushed against Ravenpaw's belly. As they circled around the den, it revealed the trampled, flattened snow still stained red.

"Look," Shadefur said, nodding to the edge of the garden, "the den."

Ravenpaw followed his gaze to the small den that had protected them from the dogs earlier that day, only to see it wasn't there anymore. Instead, there was just a crumpled pile of broken wood. "Stay alert," Rain ordered softly, then flicked his tail for the cats to follow.

Ravenpaw stayed close to the tom's side, trying to hide the fear tingling in his pelt as he got closer to the fallen den. He couldn't detect the scent of death, but he knew Silverstrike's body must be close. Between the fence and the broken den, blood was splattered over the snow, staining the white ground with deep red.

"Spread out, look around--but be careful," Rain murmured, approaching the den on quiet paws.

As Shadefur and Stonecoat drew ahead to search around the destroyed structure, Ravenpaw fell back to let the warriors search. He knew if he went up, he'd just get in the way. "It looks like some of the wood was moved," Shadefur said to his brother and Rain. "And there's a lot of blood."

"One of the dogs might've been buried," Rain murmured, his tail flicking softly. "Got hurt trying to get out?"

Stonecoat leaned low to the snow and looked around the wood, nudging some with his nose as he looked under. "There's... there's a bit of fur here... silver fur." He looked over at the others with a sad look in his eyes.

"So... Silverstrike was buried..." Shadefur murmured.

"And the dogs dragged him out," Rain finished softly. His tail began to droop. "He was a great warrior," the tom continued. "Silverstrike..." he sighed, "...Silverstrike's loyalty was unmatched."

"He'll be remembered forever," Shadefur vowed. "He made sure we were all safe before himself... like a true warrior."

"I... I can barely believe he's dead..." Stonecoat said softly, his eyes glistening with sadness.

Ravenpaw felt his stomach twist. Silverstrike's death... it hadn't seemed real to him either. After all, they hadn't seen it directly. He had figured finding the tom's body would, obviously, confirm it for him, but the fact that his body wasn't here was even more so convincing--he wouldn't have been able to leave by himself, not after the dog attack. No... the dogs had taken him away.

Ravenpaw's ears suddenly pricked as a rumbling grew in his ears. It sounded like a monster, a big one. A close one.

The others had noticed, too. "We should leave," Rain meowed. "There's... there's nothing for us here."

A strange, loud sound rung through the air, and Rain instantly stiffened. His fur began to bristle, and his eyes were locked on the entrance to the garden. It was silent for a moment, then a soft crunching sound. Rain took a step back, and the rest of the cats instantly did the same. Ravenpaw could feel himself slinking closer to the snow, fear making his heart pound. A quiet uneasiness had entered the air.

Then, three Twolegs appeared from around the house, walking together with long straight sticks in their hands. They paused as they entered the garden, blocking the cats' way out. They talked to each other, strange chittering that Ravenpaw couldn't understand. He felt frozen, wishing he was closer to his brothers but too terrified to move to join them.

One of the Twolegs bent its long legs and crouched down, reaching

out one paw. It made a strange clicking sound from its mouth. Ravenpaw swallowed in worry. It was crouched--that meant it could leap quickly if it needed. Ravenpaw desperately hoped Rain would tell him what to do, but the tom was silent, waiting.

One of the Twolegs that was still standing said something to its friends, then stepped closer.

"Ravenpaw, here, now!"

Grateful for Rain's order, Ravenpaw turned and fled to the tom. Rain himself turned and ran, with Shadefur and Stonecoat right on his paws. They ran to the very corner of the garden, and Rain leaned his front paws against the fence. It swayed at his weight, and he pushed harder, forcing it to lean away. "Help me," he ordered Shadefur and Stonecoat. Instantly, the toms leaned up with him and started to push. They were trying to topple the fence.

Ravenpaw looked back into the garden. Two of the Twolegs were still at the entrance, blocking any chance of them leaving, while the third was approaching slowly, carefully.

"Rain, what's it doing?" Ravenpaw pressed against the fence, hoping that it would give away so they could run to freedom. It was like the dogs all over again, trapped with no way out.

The tom didn't answer. The fence swayed dangerously with each push, but it refused to give. "We'll have to climb. When we get up top it will fall, so be careful," Rain meowed, and without warning, he hooked his claws into the wood and swarmed up the side. It dipped at his weight but was stronger than Ravenpaw thought, leaning over into the garden of the other den but staying upright.

"Ravenpaw, go!" Shadefur shoved his shoulder to shock him from his trace. Swallowing his terror, Ravenpaw struggled to dig his claws into the soft wood. He could the Twolegs speaking loudly to each other, hear rushing pawsteps--the Twoleg was running for them. Rain made it to top and looked down at them, then jumped for the other side. Ravenpaw felt the fence steady slightly, and realized Rain was trying to hold it still for them.

Shadefur and Stonecoat rushed up the fence next to their younger brother. It swayed under Ravenpaw, and he struggled to hold on as it rocked back and forth for a moment. He heard Rain grunt from the other side as Shadefur pulled himself to the top. He walked unsteadily on the edge until he was over Ravenpaw, leaning down in readiness to grab him when he neared.

"Watch out!" Shadefur hissed suddenly, his eyes turning up from Ravenpaw to behind the young tom. He let a growl grow in his throat, hissing fiercely and flashing out a paw, but then something grabbed Ravenpaw by his scruff, forcing him from the fence.

The Twoleg had grabbed him.

He struggled to get free, hissing desperately in hope that, somehow, he might scare it into dropping him. He lashed his claws in an attempt to catch its skin, knowing it was his only chance, but the Twoleg was out of his reach. He heard a yowl of fury and saw a flash of gray fur as Shadefur leaped for the Twoleg. It screeched as Ravenpaw's brother dug his claws into its leg, but then it was running.

Ravenpaw was jerked violently by his scruff, pain flaring through his skin; the Twoleg's movements seemed clumsy and slow compared to a cat's. He saw a flash of another Twoleg as they passed the two guarding the entrance of the garden. Shadefur's furious yowl hit the cold air. "Ravenpaw!" he heard his brother cry.

Ravenpaw wiggled as fierce as he could, flipping his body every way he could. For a moment, he felt the Twoleg's grip loosen, then another paw grabbed under his front legs, holding him still. He tried to scratch with his back claws, but the Twoleg's upper leg seemed to be protected by a thick matting of fur.

Ravenpaw looked around desperately, hoping to see something that could help him, but the only thing he could see was the monster the Twoleg was bringing him to. He could feel himself growing tired, the pull on his scruff draining his energy. The Twoleg carried him to the back of the monster, a large gaping hole showing a dark inside.

He fought as the Twoleg climbed inside of the monster with him still in its grasp. He didn't want to be eaten--cats weren't prey! *Please, StarClan, help me!* He hoped beyond anything that some cat, any cat, would appear and help him escape.

The dark of the monster was confusing and disorienting to his terrified eyes, and he barely had time to register anything before he was shoved in something dark and cold. It was shut behind him, locking him in a small space that seemed to be made of a hard, shiny web that was ice cold under his paws. For the first few moments, he cowered in the corner, too terrified to try anything.

The Twoleg said something, pressing its flat, hairless paw against the side of the little den, then left into the dawn light. With a screeching groan, the monster closed its mouth and left him alone in the darkness.

So... Bet you didn't expect this. Man, I really like to torture my poor characters, don't I? Well, anyway, sorry for the late update, I was having some writers' block, I hope the three people that read this don't mind (not salty, just sarcastic). I hope the next chapter will go roughly smoothly, but I have no idea quite yet. And look, actual questions! Haven't done that for a while.

Question #1: So... whatcha think?

Question #2: What do you think this means for Ravenpaw?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rowanpaw's legs sunk deep into the mud of BatClan's territory. He never remembered it being this deep. He trudged through the thick, sticky mud with all the strength he could manage, feeling it clump on his fur, dragging him downward. But yet he kept going, feeling a pull to go deeper into the pine forest without even knowing why.

The cool moonlight shone down on his fur with a soft breeze, not warm but not cold, either. Through the thin undergrowth, he spotted a flash of brown fur. He followed the cat, only seeing flashes of their fur as they slunk over the snow. It looked small, skinny, young... Even though most of his Clan had brown fur of some sort, he could feel it in his heart on who this cat was...

"Blazepaw?" he called softly, spotting the cat's tail flutter behind a tree. It appeared on the other side, turning back to look at him. It had bright amber eyes, not Blazepaw's own brown shade.

Rowanpaw recognized the cat instantly. It was the same face that stared at him every time he gazed into a river.

It was Rowanpaw himself.

Rowanpaw stared back at the vision of himself in shock. Then it was gone, continuing its hunt through the trees. For a few moments, he was frozen in shock. There were... two of him?

Suddenly, a loud barking screech sounded ahead of him, in the direction vision-him had gone. Fear tickled his paws, and he forced himself through the mud, belly-deep and weakening. It sucked on his paws and threatened to drag him down, but he had recognized that sound--the bark of a fox.

He broke through some undergrowth to see vision-Rowanpaw digging his claws deep into a fox's eye. It screeched, letting go of him and rushing away. It stumbled through some undergrowth, revealing a cat hiding

there, and lashed out blindly before disappearing, leaving a trail of blood.

Rowanpaw watched as vision him struggled to his paws, turning to face the flattened undergrowth. Rowanpaw knew he would see Aspenheart gathering her wits and shaking her head as if she had been jolted too harshly in a training session, but the cat who slunk out was not the traitorous rat he expected...

Blazepaw.

His brother was shaking, staring after the fox with shock. Then he turned to vision-Rowanpaw. He began to open his mouth, began to say something, then he gurgled on his blood as vision-Rowanpaw slashed his claws through the young tom's throat. He stood there for a moment, blood rushing down his chest, then his legs collapsed.

Rowanpaw staggered forward, watching in shock as his brother's blood pooled around his paws. He looked up, staring into the eyes of the other him, and whispered, "why? He was the only one left who cared about us..."

The cat stared right back, deep into his soul. "Because we're a monster," he growled in a deep, harsh voice. "And no matter what we do, we'll always be alone."

Rowanpaw blinked open his eyes. For a moment he lay there, just seeing his dream. How many times had the image of his brother lying dead at his paws haunted him? How many times had he watched himself kill the only cat left that he loved? The dream returned every few nights to slip into his mind and take over his thoughts. By now, when he woke, he didn't even find himself scared of such a future.

He felt tired, more tired than he should. For a moment he felt nothing, just a numb cold biting at his skin through his thin fur, then his body finished waking up, and the dull ache of hunger returned to his stomach, quickly getting stronger, like an infected wound, getting worse and worse until it burned.

With a groan, Rowanpaw forced himself to his paws. He swayed for

a moment, head empty and light, but he shook it clear and stumbled to the entrance of the den. The clearing outside was covered with a thick layer of snow, and he walked quietly over to the frozen river, barely feeling the cold.

Most of the water was covered by a thick, untouched layer of ice, but one small part looked as if it had been broken quite a few times. Rowanpaw placed his paws on the film of ice and braced himself, then swiftly drew his paws up, and then down as hard as he could. It broke instantly, plunging his paws into the freezing water underneath. He retreated, shaking his paws briefly, before lapping at the water.

It dropped like tiny rocks into his stomach, sending streaks of icicles through his body. His stomach twisted in starvation, and he regretfully tasted the air. He didn't want to hunt, he just wanted to sleep. He didn't like hunting, it took too much concentration, too much work. Sleep... it was easy. Painless. When he was asleep, he didn't have to feel the emptiness in his chest.

For a while, he just wandered, not even bothering to hunt yet. The forest seemed endless, just tree after tree with cold sunlight shining through the bare branches and sparkling over the snow. A few times he heard a creature scuttle away from his approach, but he didn't want to use the energy to move faster than a walk.

After he got to a certain point, he started to curve back toward the cave, his ear barely twitching at the sound of a bird fluttering away from a branch. It cried a warning to other prey in the area as it left, the sound carrying clearly through the morning air.

In BatClan, he would've been desperate for that bird, but out here, it was easy. He didn't have to try because the prey barely knew to run away. He was starving only because he chose to be. He didn't have anyone to feed, anyone to look out for. Out here, he had no... purpose. No reason to survive each day.

As he got closer to the clearing, the scent of blood touched his scent glands--it was sweet and warm. Mouse blood. He slowed as he approached the thin undergrowth surrounding the place he was staying, peering through the green to see a familiar cat sitting there.

Willowpaw.

She sat with a straight back, a small body at her paws. The white of her coat blended in well with the snow, while the black stood out fiercely. *Why is she still coming here?* He didn't like to admit he had almost enjoyed her other two visits. This forest, the cave... it was lonely and cold, the den feeling so large when he was asleep, so it had been nice to talk to a cat, no matter who they were.

He saw her nose twitch and knew she had found his scent. He slipped out of the undergrowth as she looked over. She stood instantly, tail swishing through the air. "I found a mouse on my way here, and since I'm not hungry, I thought you might want."

Anger burned in Rowanpaw's belly, infusing with the long-set frustration already settled there. "Think I can't hunt for myself?" he growled.

Her eyes stayed bright and glowing, and her fur was smooth with content. "I know you can hunt for yourself, but it would be wasteful not to eat when you can. After all, there are others less fortunate than you are." A brief gleam of challenge lit her ice-blue eyes as her voice hardened just a tiny bit.

For a moment, Rowanpaw hesitated. He had expected her to get at least a little upset, but she still stayed so... happy. He didn't quite understand it. How, in a world full of such darkness, could she keep a bright face, a sane mind? Could she actually see through the dark, or was she blind to it? Was she just naive of the world around her?

And then he understood.

She couldn't see through the black cloud covering the world, and she wasn't naive. She was *spoiled.* She didn't have to worry about the darkness because others took care of it for her. She didn't have to fight each day, instead, she could sit and stuff herself. She wasn't coming to visit him because she understood him or even liked him, she just felt *bad* for him. He was something she thought she could fix.

But he was shattered. And he knew it.

"Leave," he growled, gazing at the snow instead of her because a part of him was telling him to look at the truth in her eyes.

"What?" she sounded surprised. "I just got here. We haven't even talked! Something really cool actually happened, Pebblepeak found--"

"Leave!" Depression weighed heavy in his stomach. He felt empty and lost--he wasn't a Clan cat anymore, he was a rogue, something to be disliked by the Clans. So why was she trying so hard to be his friend? *She's lying. She wants something. Everyone wants something.* "I don't want you here!"

She was quiet for a moment, then she meowed in a slightly offended voice, "I don't plan on leaving just because you're in a bad mood. You'll have to give me an actual reason to get rid of me."

Frustration clawed at his belly, fighting with the need to talk to someone, anyone. There was a tiny, wiggling feeling growing in his chest, a desperation to break and beg for Emberheart to come back so he could see her beautiful fur once again. But she was *gone*. The only light in the world was gone and he would never see it again.

He just wanted the pain to stop. He wanted everything to stop...

"Leave me alone..." he murmured. He wanted to scare her away, but he was so tired. His head was fuzzy and he could barely stand. He just wanted to curl up in his dirty nest in the cold cave and slip away into a dream and never wake up. He just wanted to see Emberheart again, feel her warm fur, hear her kind voice.

And then there was warm fur against his side. A sweet smell filled his scent glands, calming the pain that had twisted his belly for so long. Slowly, he was led to the den. He felt cold as he landed in his nest, the warmth of the other cat disappearing, then it returned with the sweet scent of mouse.

"Eat," she murmured softly, nudging his cheek toward the prey. He was too tired to argue, and numbly ate the food gifted to him. It felt empty going down, but after he finished he quickly found himself falling into sleep. A soft tongue touched his shoulder and began to

clean his fur. He remembered her doing this before. It felt... nice. He missed the feeling of a Clan. He missed the feeling of another cat.

He missed Emberheart.

And so, Silent Stars has ended. I have actually already started book four, but I'm still at the very beginning and I'm going to try to get farther before publishing anything, but it should be roughly quick, I'm sure time will fly. I'll also be trying to add more to my Super Editions, one of which I plan to publish the first few chapters of in order to see how you guys like it, but more on that when it actually happens...whenever it happens.

For now, the synopsis of Clouded Skies #4 - Loyalties Divided:

The EchoClan patrol struggles to rescue their missing member in the Twolegplace while an enemy closes in. Back at the Clan territories, Willowpaw deals with her wavering loyalty while a BatClan apprentice tries to keep his suffering Clan together.